

JOURNAL



WALKING THE LENGTH OF BRITAIN

*A journey on foot, cross country
from Lands End at the end of England
to John o'Groats at the top of Scotland
1st April to 27th June 1998
88 days*

The Planning

The planning stage of this journey encompassed a period of 12 months.

Fitness

We set ourselves a fitness program to increase both our strength and endurance. We have always been regular weekend walkers but now we had to get serious. Initially we walked for one hour every night. Where we live is very hilly and this served us well. After three months we planned regular full day Sunday walks through Sydney's national parks, other suburbs and city streets. The rugged terrain in the National Parks increased our stamina and built our strength. The variety of a full day's walking in other suburbs and in the city added interest to our task. During all these walks Philip used a map and compass for practice and to increase familiarity. One day we decided to walk from our home in Illawong to visit friends in Lilyfield. This journey would normally take about an hour in the car. They were most surprised when we arrived on foot!

Six months before our departure we started wearing our boots for all our walking and doubled the length of our nightly walk.

Three months before leaving we started wearing our backpacks and gradually over that 12 week period we increased the weight until one month before leaving we carried a full backpack.

Due to work commitments we managed only one overnight camping trip to test our tent. Our destination was down a steep and rocky hill to a picturesque and secluded sandy beach shaded beneath towering cliffs in the Royal National Park. We had booked our tent space and as we put our tent up atop a rise overlooking the beach we noted with some satisfaction that there were only a couple of other tents, one of them large, placed further down on a grassy level piece of land directly behind the beach. The occupants were not to be seen. Our first clue came when a young man arrived and erected a tent next to ours, went into it and emerged stark naked. He was friendly and chatty for a few moments then drifted off down to the sea. At dusk small groups of naked men emerged from the rocks at either end of the beach and trudged back to their tent. Whoops, a gay beach? It was rather disconcerting but I tried not to look even when the men paraded up and down the beach wearing only **short** jackets to warm them in the fading light and shadowy cool of the evening. Luckily there was a breeze to keep the mozzies away. Still all our equipment worked well and I even kept a straight face when one friendly soul stopped to chat to me whilst I was perched on a rock eating my sausage and eggs for breakfast. He eyed my sausage and took great delight in standing directly in front of me with his groin at my eye level so when I raised my eyes to return his conversation, my sight had to cast over his penis.

Equipment

We spent many hours researching our equipment on the Internet and visited every outdoor shop in the city centre of Sydney. As we had to carry everything the weight was very important. We listed all the items we would need and found the lightest and best of each.

We bought OS maps over the Internet <http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/oswebsite/> and spent many a happy night mapping out our route with a yellow highlighter. We bundled our maps and guidebooks into parcels to post to Post Offices along our route, when we arrived in England. Some guidebooks we bought along the way.

This planning and preparation paid off as we had no trouble with our gear and neither of us had to endure a single blister in the entire journey. Quite an achievement, judging from the experiences of others. Although we felt some discomfort during the first couple of weeks of walking, it soon disappeared and although weary at day's end, we were able to enjoy every day.

If you have the will and can find the time then this journey is recommended. It was such a wonder. These were precious days.





What we wore, what we carried with us and other practical information

Outfit and equipment:

- Boots - we chose Scarpa leather boots. They are sturdy, reasonably lightweight, give protection for the ankles, quite waterproof and will last for many years. They are not cheap but our choice was justified in that we are both still wearing the same pair of boots that we wore for this journey. We Snow-sealed our boots before leaving. If boots get wet, as they invariably will, then stuff them with dry newspaper overnight. This will absorb the dampness. If crossing a stream or river, always keep your boots on to avoid slipping and change your socks on the other side.
- Socks – three pairs each. These need to be changed regularly. Good thick socks from an outdoor shop will protect your feet and give comfort. Always change wet socks straight away and never walk in them.
- Gortex jacket. Expensive but worth every cent. Breathable and completely water proof and wind proof.
- One pair of lightweight, comfortable, fast drying trousers. If they are slim fitting then they need stretch.
- One pair of shorts. These should be slightly loose and comfortable.
- One pair of thermal leggings. (These can be worn under trousers or with shorts if necessary)
- One thermal underwear long-sleeved top
- Two t-shirts each
- One long sleeved t-shirt for me and a long sleeved shirt for Philip. These can be bought in an outdoor shop made of a fabric that is light, warm and breathable.
- Long sleeved fleece top with zip at top front from an outdoor shop.
- 5 pairs undies each
- 2 bras (me)
- One red silk short nightie (for me – just so I remember that I am a girl)
- Warm beanie and fabric sun hat
- Gloves (I didn't take these but had to buy them along the way as my hands became swollen and red with the cold)
- Scarf
- Waterproof over-trousers – Gortex would be best as breathable. We wished we had bought Gortex.
- Gortex gaiters – for those times (which were frequent) that you need to walk through slush and mud
- Telescopic hiking stick – this protects the knees and gives stability on steep ascents and descents. We climbed over hundreds and hundreds of stiles. A hiking stick reduces the stress on the knees by 30% and is a great aid up and down (most particularly down) steep, often slippery with mud, hills. Remember that extra weight on your back is extra strain on the knees.
- 70 litre backpack (We bought Macpac from New Zealand as they suited our body types the best and are adjustable)
- Large heavy duty plastic bag to line back pack (from outdoor shops). If you don't have this then the things you are carrying in your back pack will get wet.
- Selection of nylon drawstring "sacks" to separate items in backpack. We used the sack with our clothes in it for a pillow.
- Self inflating mattress from outdoor shop
- Goose down sleeping bag. Expensive, but light and warm.
- Lightweight tent for two with annexe for backpacks. It should be weatherproof and be able to withstand strong winds.
- Trianga stove (uses methylated spirits and contains cooking pot and pan). We kept our stove in a special waterproof drawstring bag we purchased from an outdoor shop.
- Fuel bottle for methylated spirits – 1 litre
- Waterproof matches or lighter
- Ground sheet for tent
- Second smaller groundsheet for sitting on to eat or relax
- pen knife
- small torch
- whistle (to blow if you need help)

- small plastic spatula for burying your faeces in the countryside
- 2 x plastic plates
- 2 x plastic bowls
- 2 x plastic mugs
- 2 x plastic cutlery sets
- small to medium lightweight containers (from outdoor shop) to store coffee, teabags, sugar, powdered milk, butter, eggs etc.
- zip top plastic bags to keep other food items in (All food kept in separate drawstring waterproof bag from outdoor shop)
- Small plastic spatula and spoon for cooking
- 1 water bottle each (1 litre metal from outdoor shop)
- Waterproof map case which Philip wore around his neck
- Good compass and the knowledge to use it competently
- Sewing kit
- Maps and guidebooks . The maps we posted in bundles to Post Offices en route for collection. The used maps we posted to a friend in the UK. We bought guidebooks for long distance paths as we journeyed. These were readily available in the town at the beginning of each path.
- Journey plan – we carried a detailed journey plan so we knew where to go and what we needed to do when we got there.
- Pen and notebook (for the writing of this Journal). Each filled notebook was posted and then a new one purchased.
- Electronic organiser contained addresses and useful information. Also for recording expenses (budgeting) and making notes.
- Credit card (with cash deposited on to it to cover the entire journey) for cash withdrawals. We always carried enough money, shared between us, for several days.
- Small light fabric shoulder bag (for me) for carrying money and cards when not shouldering back pack.
- Telstra phone home card for ringing family in Australia from public phone boxes. We did not want to carry a mobile phone and charger but this is of course a personal choice. We were very weight conscious when it came to our packs.
- SLR camera and film.
- Camp towel (from outdoor shops)
- Toiletries (soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, shampoo sachets, deodourant, nail clippers, hairbrush, small pair of scissors) – we used one type of soap for clothes and bodies. However, campsites, with washing machines and sachets of detergent, gave us the opportunity to give everything a 'proper' wash. Also in some bed and breakfast establishments, the owners took pity on us and washed and dried our clothes. (Or maybe they just didn't want us to use the bathroom for washing our clothes and radiators in our room for drying them). To our credit, far into the journey we had a comment from a woman that we could not possibly have walked so far as we looked so fresh and clean.
- Sun cream
- Moisturiser, mascara, lipstick (for me)
- Small "twist" clothesline from outdoor shops.
- First aid – our first aid kit consisted of one elastic bandage and Moleskin. (Moleskin – blister protection. If you feel a "hotspot" on your foot then immediately sit down and take off shoe and sock and cover the spot with a piece of moleskin. It will prevent a blister from forming. A wonderful product.)
- We were fortunate in that we did not need first aid on our journey. A first aid kit for hikers can be obtained from The Red Cross.

Other information

- A lightweight rope would have been handy. We did not anticipate the necessity of a river crossing as we experienced in the Scottish glens. Our crossing would have been much safer if we had crossed one at a time secured to the other with a rope.
- The average weight of my pack was 12kgs and the average weight of Philip's was 16 kgs. This was limited to 20% of our body weight.

Accommodation:

We did not pre-book any accommodation at the start of the journey. We obtained accommodation lists for some of the long distance paths we travelled and occasionally rang ahead to book a room in a B&B. Depending on weather and location we stayed in Bed and Breakfasts, pubs or camped either in a campsite or in a farmer's field. Where possible, when camping on farmland, we asked permission. On a couple of occasions we stayed in mountain rescue huts or "mountain bothies" as they are sometimes called.

One of the joys of this journey was to have a free spirited approach to it. The feeling that where you ended the day was a matter of choice, not a matter of necessity. We gained security from the carrying of a tent.

Food

We always carried food for about two days, just in case the villages we passed did not have a shop (and many of them did not). There were times, eg. when walking through the Glens of Scotland that we needed to carry more food. We had no difficulty in planning this a day or two ahead. From the maps we carried it was easy to determine what was necessary.

Maps and Books Used:

Ordnance Survey Mapping Index (Free) – used for working out which maps were necessary for our journey.

Ordnance Survey Maps and books used in journey:

Map / Book Type	Number	Area
Ordnance Survey Landranger	203	Land's End
	204	Truro to Falmouth
	201	Plymouth and Launceston
	200	Newquay and Bodmin
	190	Bude, Clovelly
	191	Okehampton & North Dartmoor
	192	Exeter and Sidmouth
	193	Taunton and Lyme Regis
	181	Minehead and Brendon Hills
	182	Weston-super-Mare and Bridgewater
	183	Yeovil and Frome
	172	Bristol and Bath
Guidebook		The Cotswold Way – The Complete Walker's Guide by Mark Richards – Penguin Books
Guidebook		The Heart of England Way by Richard Sale – Aurum Press in association with Ordnance Survey
Guidebook		The Staffordshire Way – Official Guide – Staffordshire County Council
Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure	1	The Peak District – Dark Peak area
Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure	24	The Peak District – White Peak area
Guidebook		Pennine Way South by Tony Hopkins – Aurum Press in association with Ordnance Survey
Guidebook		Pennine Way North by Tony Hopkins – Aurum Press in association with Ordnance Survey
Guidebook		Pennine Way Companion by A. Wainwright – Michael Joseph London
Ordnance Survey	103	Blackburn, Burnley

Map / Book Type	Number	Area
Landranger		
	98	Wendslydale and Upper Wharfdale
	91	Appleby-in-Westmorland
	92	Barnard Castle
	74	Kelso and Coldstream Jedburgh and Duns
	73	Peebles, Galashiels
	72	Upper Clyde Valley
	65	Falkirk and Linlithgow
	66	Edinburgh and Midlothian area
	52	Pitlochry to Crieff
	58	Perth to Alloa
	43	Braemar and Blair Athol
	36	Grantown Aviemore and Cairngorm area
Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure	3	The Cairngorms Aviemore and Glen Avon
Ordnance Survey Landranger	35	Kingussie and Monadhliath Mountains
	26	Inverness and Strathglass
	21	Dornoch, Alness and Invergordon
	17	Helmsdale and Strath of Kildonan
	11	Thurso and Dunbeath
	12	Thurso and Wick

Other books used for planning:

Lands End to John O'Groats – A Choice of Footpaths for Walking the Length of Britain
by Andrew McCloy
Published by Hodder & Stoughton (1995)

Long Distance Walker's Handbook
Published by A & C Black, London

Stilwell's National Trail Companion
Published by Stilwell's Publishing Company

Day 1 Lands End to Madron

Marazion, near Penzance in Cornwall, England, stands on the shores of Mounts Bay, bounded by sandy beaches and looking out over the fairytale and I might say, quite romantic, island of St. Michael's Mount, home to an 11th century monastery and a 15th century fort. The castle, today set amid a serene grey sea, is perched above terraced gardens on a great granite crag. We look upon this sight with excitement and enthusiasm for it is just a taste of the wonders we will see on the journey ahead. After bussing in from London we make our way to old pub by the quay where we spend our last night before beginning an 1100+ mile (1860klm) journey on foot and mostly off road from Lands End to John o'Groats. From the bottom of England to the top of Scotland.



This is the beginning and our dream is ahead of us. For many weeks we will be together 24 hours a day, we will share everything and for the most part have few others to talk to. This will be a test of our resolve and a test of our relationship. As we start our first day our enthusiasm is perhaps only slightly marred by the rain that is falling in gentle drops from a leaden sky. Philip gazes out at the wintry damp and gloomy grey day. "We must be bloody mad, it's bloody freezing" he groans, pulling his coat tighter around his hunched body and squeezing a questioning look through scrunched eyes. We both laugh with a bit too much excitement and cloud our faces in gusts of vapour as our breath hits the cold air. We know that this is a great moment for us and so with that strange twist of emotions, excitement stirred with wonder, and a short walk to the bus station, we begin our first day.

The rattly old double decker bus rocks and rolls its way over the green hills and narrow hedge lined lanes at the end of England. Not many on the bus. A slightly rotund grey haired and bearded man shouldering a huge backpack and carrying a large staff which tops his height by several inches climbs past us and up the stairs to the top deck. I like his face. It is open, rosy and wise, my supposition probably drawn from the roundness of his face and the neatness of his beard. Across the aisle is a thin scruffy man with a day pack; his demeanour circumspect, and behind sits a man who would go unnoticed but for his a dog. It is perched on his knee, looking haughty despite the ragged shagginess of its coat. The English love their dogs. I wonder whether the two with the backpacks have similar plans as us.

The bus shudders to a rumbling halt. No more time for thoughts and reflections as we step down into the large empty carpark, our anticipation as sharp as the cold wet wind that slaps our faces. There is no longer an admission charge to the tourist complex that occupies the southern most tip of Britain and so we buckle up our backpacks and head beyond it to the first and final shore of this green and ancient land. "My pack feels heavy already" I groan.

Cornwall has its own distinctive character. Its landscape encompasses great variety. The coastal lands, often edged by cliffs hiding secret caves and coves, have been shaped by strong winds and a battering sea. History, from prehistoric times through to the romance and villainy of pirates, has been imprinted into the landscape and lives in the ancient standing stones, old pubs and narrow cottages. Cornwall can be bright, blue skied and summer tourist trampled or misty and empty to its horizons with only the crashing of the sea for company. On a cold and misty day it is easy to imagine walking through a portal of time into the past. It is a county of colour and mixed topography with ancient woodlands, golden, green or bare in tune with the season; dark and foreboding, mist swirled heath lands; and streams hidden in wood and wold.

On a rise just above the jagged cliffs a signpost stretches its wooden arms showing direction to many far-flung places of the globe silently stating in black and white the miles you would have to fly in a straight line to reach them. Who flies in straight lines I would like to know? We take turns in posing, rather seriously, beneath the sign. Now we have photographs to record this momentous occasion. We both look so fresh and neat in our new gear and no doubt our inexperience shows.

Next we march down to the cliff tops so our toes can tickle the edge of Britain. Our eyes peer warily at the seething, crashing Atlantic below, its rolling grey waters lash the rocks sending cascades of spray into the wind. Philip stands much closer than I do, for heights give me the heebie geebies. I bend and pick up a small stone and place it carefully in my pocket. Philip smiles and shrugs his shoulders. We both silently wonder if that stone will ever see the harbour at John O'Groats.

The man with the staff turns out to be another prospective 'end to ender', a walker named Peter Pope from Skegness and the thin scruffy one is not very communicative but plans to hitch lifts to John O'Groats. Our hopes and aspirations for the journey are shared with Peter. He offers a pen. "Would you both sign my t-shirt?" We do. "Are you walking the Pennine Way" he asks "good, then if I get to Greg's Hut first, I'll write a message for you in the book. If you beat me there then you do likewise" he says. We have never heard of Greg's Hut but sense the mythology in his words and agree, not wishing to appear without the correct knowledge for what lies ahead.

Peter's route will not initially mirror ours and so he turns his rather ample form towards Penzance and with a smile and a wave he is gone. Each of our journeys will be a time of reflection but he will be alone. I wonder at the variety of souls this challenge draws and think it would be interesting to wait and watch over a year as each begins his or her journey.

So, formalities over we turn our backs to Peter's disappearing form and face the sea wind, striding confidently out along the coastal path to Sennen Cove. We have begun. Ahead Whitesand Bay leads into the distance to meet Cape Cornwall and casting aside the doubts and mixed emotions we had felt this morning our minds give sway to exhilaration and a great need and wish to do this "thing" and do it "all". The path follows the cliff edge

and soon Sennen Cove comes into view, its sandy shore sweeping away in a great curve, cottages gleaming as bright squares on its eastern hill and meeting untidy cliffs to the west. Well now.....the best laid plans.....Sennen Cove we find, no problem - it is after all part of the coast. But then we have to turn NE and are very quickly lost. Philip, perplexed, studies the crisp new map and moves his compass around knowledgeably. Hmmm. Confusion!! A farmer strides towards us. Will he be friendly? We have heard that walkers are unpopular with farmers. "Excuse me mate", calls Philip is Sancreed this direction?" "Aye" is his curt reply, but it is all we need. En route, southwest of Madron we pass an ancient wishing well, Sancreed Holy Well, and the remains of its baptistery, its deep pool clear and full of mystery. Remnants of weather washed rag offerings hang limply in hope from the surrounding trees and bushes.

In 1879 Sancreed Holy well was uncovered by the then Church vicar. He discovered it beneath a covering of brambles. The well has 7 stone steps leading down to it and the overhanging tree wears garlands of rag offerings or "cloutie", an assortment of rags, items of clothing and other oddments, once intended to assist healing, though now probably hung there for the preserving of an old-world tradition or perhaps a token to the spirit of the well. As part of the healing ritual, pilgrims leave a strip of cloth or ribbon on a nearby tree or bush so that the spirit of the well will perform a healing act upon it. Both the church at Sancreed and the well itself are said to be dedicated to St. Credan, a 7th Century bishop from Evesham. People have puzzled as to why a Cornish well should be dedicated to a 7th Century bishop from Evesham, but this remains a mystery. The earth mysteries investigator, Paul Deveraux, has stated that radiation levels found at Sancreed Holy Well are the highest found in Cornwall. They have been measured at 200% higher than background levels.

Philip smiles widely. 25 years I have known this man and his smile still makes my heart sing. He will be in charge of map and compass and direction and me, well, I am responsible for the journey plan, oh, and the food, of course the food. And so we share, it has always been thus.

On we go one foot after the other and it is amazing how much distance you can cover in a very short time. As we walk we talk and constantly look around absorbing as much as our senses will allow....this land that is Cornwall is old, older than the many ages of man and is riddled with Bronze Age stone circles and other prehistoric relics.

Life is a brief affair.

We stop at the Iron Age settlement of Carn Euny and light our Trianga stove for our first break and it all works well. As we sit on ancient stones in the misty morning sipping coffee, we feel rather pleased with ourselves. There is no one about but through the mist comes the muffled hum and hump of a tractor ploughing the earth. Sigh! Wild, rustic Cornwall, lacking in trees but the mottled colour, somewhat scratchy texture and distinctive character of the land bring expectation of the many secret corners we may stumble upon. Already I am in raptures, but I mustn't be too hasty, there is a long long way to go.

Carn Euny was a small farming hamlet established around 500BC. The site was discovered by miners looking for tin in the 1860's. The outlines of the huts that formed

the 'courtyard houses' of the Iron Age village are still obvious. Walking in awe, we explore the fogou, Carn Euny's 65ft underground chamber and although the area invites further exploration our day waits for us and north is our direction.

The weather holds all day but we are absolutely worn out when we find our B & B for the night in one of Madron's granite cottages. I wait by the gate and Philip goes to inquire about a room. My pack and walking stick lean against the gate and my legs throb with a deep ache. I feel a wave of relief as the stocky, dark haired Cornish woman shows us to an attic room decorated with floral prints and soft frills. I am beginning to doubt our sanity and this is only our first day. After settling in we walk across the road to a delightful little pub, the King William IV Inn and thoroughly relish a hot, English roast dinner by the fire. This is more like it!! Then it is back to the B & B and to bed.

weary feet,
weary legs,
weary bones.

I wake in a cold sweat at 3am and my mind flashes with the thought of my expensive walking stick leaning against the stone wall. Bare feet feel the floor and softly step towards the door. All is hushed. The house creaks and groans beneath my weight and the Cornish woman meets me with suspicion on the stairs. Does she sleep with one eye open I wonder? It had not occurred to me that there could be mistrust about my actions and I don't think I look like a thief, but of course, what do they look like? She escorts me outside looking with disapproval at my bare feet, but my walking stick is gone. Back in bed my disappointment and weariness bring the wetness of tears but Philip's gentle voice in the night and his warm shoulder soon settle me to slumber.

Day 2 Madron to St. Erth

Bacon and eggs, lovely hot tea from a big brown pot and then out into the sunny day. An English 'Famous Five' start. Things are looking good, yesterday's aches and pains have vanished and the day is ahead. We follow a metal lane out of Madron and clamber over green hills, through farms and across desolate gorse-covered moorland. Morning tea is on top of a gorse-covered hill by a stile with wide views over Cornwall to Mounts Bay and the sea. As we are following the central route through England, this is the last time we will see the sea for over 1,000 miles. It is a day of daffodils, hedgerows crammed with them and fields of them everywhere. We walk through a flower farm and are intoxicated by the acres of nodding golden daffodil heads that shift above the soft dark earth in a torrent of yellow. Further on up the hill we pass rows of glasshouses full of the promise a zillion carnations. What a lovely life, living with flowers.

Lunch we have in a small wood behind a stone wall and then on we trudge to St Erth, a straggling village with a few shops for buying supplies. Our first real taste of mud

comes along the bridleway to Canonstown. We slog down the narrow hedgelined and sunken track, cut off from the world around and up to our ankles in thick, oozing mud. From St. Erth we walk beside the River Hayle to a campsite. The weather is looking good and we are smiling at each other.

We enter the campsite through a gate by the river and proceed to put our tent up. Whoops, we are not yet familiar with English tent protocol. A very officious man with a face you could strike a match on barks at us that we are in the wrong place, we have done the wrong thing, we are wrong wrong wrong. As if in answer to his mood large grey clouds come rolling across the sky threatening rain. I go to pay, Philip takes the tent down. The angry clouds loom lower and a wild wind sweeps in. By the time the tent is erected in its proper location the rain is lashing the countryside with a crazy vengeance.

So now we sit in the small unheated laundry room of the campsite amid washing machines and tumble driers, feeling grey and trapped as we look out at the wet bleak world. Cold food tonight and then, sigh, a race against the raindrops to get to the tent without getting too wet.

Day 3 St. Erth to Porkellis

A gruelling day. Wild winds again whip the countryside with bitter rain and sleet. Our heads are down, eyelids half closed, hoods up and shoulders hunched to the wind but there is no protection from its stinging fury.

Philip's map reading is going really well and we don't put a foot wrong. Occasionally during the day there is brief respite from the rain and we see there are still daffodils everywhere, even growing horizontally out of the hedgerows.

Pleasure is walking.

We hardly see a soul as we criss cross the countryside using a network of public footpaths and tiny lanes.

We are using Landranger Ordnance Survey maps with a scale of 1:50000. These maps are very detailed and are a delight to study. Every feature of the countryside, even rocky outcrops, trees, farmhouses, etc. is shown on the map. The map is intricately webbed with the tiny dotted lines that represent the public footpaths we follow, many of which date back centuries to Roman times and the Stone Age. The right of way remains regardless of what the land is used for. What a fortunate country.

Public footpaths are ancient rights of way through fields, forests and moorland. Some of these are waymarked and maintained, some are not and seasonal changes in farming can change the ground. It is important to keep to the rights of way to give landowners no cause for complaint for their livelihood may be endangered by misuse of the countryside.

As the day progresses my leg becomes painful. It is the calf muscle that is causing the problem and I really do feel it must be somehow caused by my pack. At around 3.00pm the aching becomes too much to bear, increasing its jagged stabs at my fortitude with every step. It is such a struggle to carry on. We have traversed very steep hills today and we have been constantly buffeted by the now gale force winds. It is too cold to talk and there is no use anyway as the wind scatters your words to the elements and for sure they do not understand at all.

We have had advice that when walking through this area of Cornwall we should keep to paths and not wander randomly. There are many old tin mines. Tin was being worked in the gravels of the Wendron and Porkellis valleys before recorded history and these valleys are the most important source of alluvial tin in West Cornwall.

Due to the weather, camping is out of the question. Porkellis, a very wee village winds up and over the green hillside ahead and the white Star Inn is prominent on the hilltop. A few stone cottages with smoking chimneys and windows leaking the golden light of homeliness line the lane. Involuntarily our pace quickens in anticipation of the hope of shelter from the wind. The angry rain beats at us as we walk the perimeter of the Star Inn's white washed walls. All closed up, not a sign of life. But we do not give up, we are too cold and too wet. Warm visions of food and comfort float in my head and my leg pains. Philip knocks loudly on the window and a little girl smiles brightly through an opening door.

"B & B, mum they want B & B". Mum appears looking worried. Well, yes they plan to do it in the summer but they aren't ready yet. Too early in the season it seems. We must look so wet and worn that she suddenly beams and bustles us in whilst apologising for the state of the room she plans to put us in. No, we don't mind sharing with stuffed animals and stored toys, we just want shelter. So within ten minutes we are before a roaring fire, drinking tea while the room is being 'made up'. Such relief. A most delightfully cosy Cornish pub and the prospect of good company and a night indoors.

"Sleep, let me sleep, for I am sick of care;
Sleep, let me sleep, for my pain wearies me.
Shut out the light; thicken the heavy air
With drowsy incense; let a distant stream
Of music lull me, languid as a dream,
Soft as the whisper of a Summer sea."
(Christina Rossetti, "Looking Forward")

Day 4 Porkellis to Truro

Lane walking all day today. Still very windy but there are patches of blue playing hide and seek amid the scudding clouds. My leg feels much better after a rest and our spirits are refreshed.

Not a car as we trudge along the up and down of the hedged lanes over green hills with the countryside laid out before us. Nature has painted it just for us today and the colours are bright and fresh with rain and spring. We find a sheltered place by the hedge to boil up our water for coffee. Yes, I know it is only day 4, but I really look forward to our morning break. It's an ordinary ritual, a fingertip touch with the familiar. Coffee and shortbread. Yum. Such relief to shed the weight of my pack and put bottom to earth, sit back, stretch out and let the caffeine course my blood and pep me up.

I'm enormously preoccupied with food and am always hungry since starting this walk. An outdoor one pot meal can taste so good. At lunchtime we climb over the railing of a bridge and slither down to the stream where we sit by the racing, bubbling waters and cook noodles with a spicy sauce of mushrooms, tomato, onion, herbs and garlic. We top it with mounds of melting cheese. This is all washed down with milky coffee. Sounds delicious, doesn't it?

The hill is high. The hill is steep. We finally reach the top. "Do you ever wonder why when we go the wrong bloody way the path is really steep?" asks Philip with challenge and mirth in his eyes. "Oh no!!", I say "and I bet the way we should have gone is just as jolly steep!" And so it is. For the rest of the day he checks and rechecks his map. He doesn't like to make mistakes.

We make it to Truro, Cornwall's only city, my leg again very sore. On inspection I can see huge deep purple black bruising covering my whole calf and I am quite concerned. I must finish the walk, we are so new and have so far to go. I refuse to give up.

Truro is representative of an English County Town. Locals and those from the surrounding countryside stride along its cobbled streets and tiny alleyways, known as "opes" (one has the name of "Squeezegut Alley") and there is plenty of scope here in the way of shops for us to stock up our backpacks.

The weather is abysmal, so damp and so cold, therefore no camping but B & B is hard to find. Now, here we are at last in an annexe of a B&B establishment and it is very pleasant. A pink building, very pink, like a lolly house. Our wet washing soon decks every spare hanging place in the room and our bodies sprawl in complete repose on the bed. In this poor weather we are spoiling ourselves while we can. "It has to get better" Philip says "the weather will get warmer and we will get stronger and then we will fly along". That's logical, I think, but then of course it could just keep raining.

Everyone we meet is so interested in what we are doing. Earlier in Truro we were stopped in the street by elderly couple would have chatted all day about our adventure. I suppose we do not fit the stereotype for the archetypal back packer. We are both in our 40's, and neither of us has a beard! I think we will come up in a few people's conversations tonight. Spoken about by strangers, our descriptions and doings are words tossed in the space between them. People we will never see again nor they us but they have recognised us and we them.

Day 5 Truro to Boswiddle

The trees are still bare of leaves and the winds are cold and from the north. At this time of year the prevailing winds are supposed to come from the SW but for 5 days now the wind has blown in from the north in icy gusts. This morning we leave our B & B in Truro quite late and walk through the back streets of the town and under the viaduct to Idless and then through Idless Wood. The path is clear and well used although somewhat muddy underfoot. It is a pleasant walk by a chattering, bubbling stream. We take our break early. It is good to be out of the cold wind for a while and eating a warm bowl of soup in a pub at St. Erme. St. Erme has ugly houses but a lovely old church.

I am sitting on the side of a hill in the shelter of a thicket overlooking patchwork rises and dips of the land which spreads its swathe of green to the white clay hills of the St. Austell district. We are waiting for the evening to draw in before we put the tent up. It is a clandestine affair. No farmers appear to be home this Sunday afternoon so we are unable to ask permission to camp in their fields. So we sit in secret and wait for the cover of the gathering dusk, I believe farmers around here are somewhat pernickety and may well say "move on" if their eyes happen to take us into view.

My leg, trouser pushed up, lies across Philip's lap. "We'll have to do something about this" he observes as he tries to gently rub away the bruise. My huge bruise covering most of my lower inside leg, is now an even deeper black-grey. Rest helps but it is difficult to understand why it is happening. It was too painful for me to walk any further today and anyway there is nowhere to stay, we are really out in the country miles from a village.



Tonight it is a cold meal and then we will snuggle down together in our sleeping bags and hopefully my leg will be better tomorrow. We will be up to see daybreak peek over the hilltops and on our way before the farmer appears on his big tractor with his big red voice shouting out at we who are strangers.

Day 6 Boswiddle to Ruthenbridge

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter. We lie in our sleeping bags listening to the rain and with a groan begin the unpleasant task of packing up a wet tent. The fields lie wide and quiet and free of farmers. Maybe they are still in their warm kitchens leaning over their steaming porridge as they plan their day. Our stomachs though are empty as we head off

along country lanes into the soft light of an early and grey day. This is to be a day of walking, walking, walking.

We are walking 18 miles today. A mile is so long, this I have found out. They seem even longer when you are tramping through farmland and over hills. Public footpath signs become dwindling paths blocked with barbed wire and electric fences. The right of way is on the map and so we go on. We take turns to hold down the electric wire with Philip's walking stick for the other to climb over. Packs come off and are tossed over barbed wire and then the delicate task of climbing over without catching our clothes. In places we have to push through hedges and we are scratched and disheartened by the sheer effort it takes to walk these miles.

We come to a steep hillock laced with barbed wire. Philip takes the lead but catches his foot and catapults down the embankment into swampy grassland. "*****" he swears. The landing is soft and he is unhurt. The rights of way don't seem very well observed around here.

My leg is again paining terribly so we need get to a campsite for we care not for another night in a field. Fortunately the day is cool, clear and still and although the walking is far from easy, we are determined to reach our goal. Philip's neck is very sore, 'map reader's neck' we call it from constantly bending his head forward and we are plastered with mud. 7.00pm and the campsite is in sight, such relief. Now for a hot shower and a cold comfort meal of cracker biscuits and peanut butter. We are too tired to cook. We just need to rest. Then to curl up in our sleeping bags and drift into thankful but fitful slumber of lucid dreams. Interestingly we both experience such dreams these nights in the tent, it seems the way when your head is so close to the earth of a million stories "They say that the dead die not but remain near to the rich heirs of their grief and mirth.....". (Rupert Brook)

Day 7 Ruthenbridge to Dunmure

Today is an easy day. We wash and dry some of our clothes, sort out all our gear and air everything in the cool spring sunshine. We are the only campers on the site, not surprising given the temperature and the weather over the last week. We are already beginning to feel comfortable in our gypsy style life. When I think of our affluent life in Australia I am amazed how quickly we have adjusted. Perhaps we are wanderers at heart. I wonder whether this freedom will have a price. Maybe we will be unsettled for the rest of our days.

"I've been thinking" Philip said "about your leg - let's chop it off, no really, are you sure you have the weight evenly distributed in your pack?" I think it is but together we repack it. It seems a clear solution as only one leg is sore. Now I will hope, for this pain is a burden to me.

We sit on a picnic table near the campsite entrance and write a few postcards home to our children and other family members and then set off to find the Camel Trail. Our way takes us over the river and up the hill through some houses. "I think we should be on the other side of the river" I say. "No, it is this way" Philip retorts somewhat tetchily. I rather feel I am right, but keep quiet for the moment. He likes reading the map.

The electricity pylons match the map but where is our path through this dense wood to the river and the trail? At the bottom of the hill Philip decides we need to cross the fields to the river. There is a bridge there for us to cross, he tells me pointing to a tiny line on the map. Another hillock heavily barbed with wire stands between the field and us. "I'm sorry, but we have to go through there, I don't want to either, but the compass never lies", he declares. "Groan", I take a deep breath and begin to pick my way. "Surely the Camel Trail would be easier to locate than this, we shouldn't have crossed the river back there" I say, looking sideways from my eyes. Philip goes first. His head stands proud of his bent shoulders as he strides purposefully up the bramble-covered hillock. A barbed wire fence reaches half way up the other side of the small hill. Philip flexes, then jumps, clearing it easily but momentarily forgetting the pack on his back. I wince. His body skews right as the weight unbalances him. The earth beneath the grassy field is disguised. As Philip lands he discovers it is thickly liquid. 'Splat', He sways then tips into a fall. His demeanour darkens and his voice is deep with disgruntlement. More swearing. I maintain a smooth face as he helps me down, but it isn't easy. I say nothing as I know that now he has had two falls, there will be no more. Philip also says nothing. And so we are quiet.

More barbed wire on the other side of the field. It looks as though there is a picnic site beside the river, small stone table and seats, a few sheep and goats and a tiny wooden bridge. We cross but find ourselves in a maze of islands amid ponds and streams. Out of the house on the hillside blasts a yell of derision. Here is the red-faced farmer I have dreaded meeting. He stands shouting from his verandah. Down he marches, his chest puffed out before him, his face simmering like a saucepan of tomato soup. He strides down to confront us, his expression showing suspicion and hostility and pompously demands to know what we are doing trespassing on his property. We explain, but he doesn't believe us so I smile a small smile, look him straight in the eye and with friendly calm tell him of our journey and that we are sorry to be lost on his land but we really want to find the Camel Trail. Philip also smiles and apologises. The hard lines ease from his face and he explains his love of otters and other wild creatures. Here in these pools such creatures flourish and his need is to protect them. His home is not a tourist adventure. We smile, he smiles and a few minutes later we are walking along the even surface of the disused railway line, now a sandy track overshadowed by lovely trees, towards Dunmere. This is the Camel Trail.

The Camel Trail

Converted from a disused railway The Camel Trail runs for seventeen miles through some of Cornwall's most pleasing landscapes. It links the fishing port of Padstow to the market town of Wadebridge, the County town of Bodmin and continues to the outskirts of Bodmin Moor passing through unspoilt countryside. The area is home to an abundance of wildlife. You will have to tread lightly and look carefully to see the wildlife.

A few or four miles of easy walking, meeting the occasional cyclist, is it all takes to reach Dunmere on the River Camel. We walk down the hill looking for the campsite but it is now just an empty field without even the echo of a camper's

call, so Philip heads into the pub to ask about B & B's. We are directed up a lane to a cottage by the river and here we met Jill and Roy. Jill is in the garden in her waterproofs and wellies and what a happily organised garden it is, falling in neat flower filled terraces to the dancing, tree lined River Camel. Whilst we are out at the pub for dinner Jill goes into our room and tidies it. She notices we have some dirty washing so she takes it and does it for us. On our return it is dry and neatly folded on our bed.

We join them in their living room and have a glass of red wine with them. Jill says she hopes we don't mind but she went into our room and took our washing. No we don't mind - in fact we think it quite wonderful. All help gratefully accepted. We sit with them and a young man named Robert. Jill has taken Robert under her wing and encouraged him to a job in the quarry and a worthwhile life. Robert has a significant intellectual disability. I like this woman who, from her stories of hardship and loss has borne so much but has so much to give and gives it willingly. Tonight I can sleep in this lovely comfy bed and drift off to the sound of rushing water at the end of the garden. What bliss!!

Day 8 Dunmere to Bodmin Moor

Jill and Roy are the perfect hosts. After breakfast this morning Roy, under firm instruction from Jill, drives Philip to Bodmin town to get some methylated spirits for our stove. What makes people like this? We are strangers and they offer an abundance of friendship and help. Life has sometimes been very unwelcoming to them but they have no sharp edges. They seem innately good.

The Camel Trail, following the River Camel is then our companion for 9 miles of absolutely delightful walking. Sunshine and blue skies, an encounter with a spritely 87 year old woman full of the joy of spring and the company of an old walker for a mile or so, the inspiring scenery of tall trees, multicoloured hedges and crystal water rushing over stones all contribute to a good start to the day. Inevitably though the grey washes in again and the rain becomes persistent and cold.

We leave the Camel Trail at Merry Meeting and climb hill after hill, until finally we arrive at St. Breward, the highest village in Cornwall. This must be its only claim to fame as I find it a dreary village of grey stone cottages that straggle over the cold hill like so many wintry stones. We purchase a few provisions in the village shop and chat with the more than adequately fatted keeper who leads us to a little bubbling spring which bursts from the paved ground beside one of the cottages. Here we fill our bottles with the pure water and we are on our way. Adjacent to the church en route out of the village we come across The Old Inn which dates from the 11th century. "This looks interesting" says Philip "let's have a pint".

We walk through the low door into the past. Solid granite walls and slate flagstone floor with two huge granite fire places each leaping with the bright warmth of a real open fire. A grey haired, rosy woman sits with a fat rug of a dog on her wool-skirted lap. She is

lunching with two elderly gentlemen wearing country garb, warm tweed jackets and grey trousers tucked into green wellington boots, each absently fingering the pipe smoking at the corner of his mouth. The conversation is a gentle well-educated hum interspersed with deep chuckles. Interesting though how we all wear the uniform of our identity group. Several other similarly styled people relax on chairs of old dark wood and the well-rounded girl behind the bar serves them as so many have before her. We wonder if outside the hounds are on the moor for we feel in the world of story.

Outside though it is fine weather for baying hounds for the outlook is bleak and a cutting wind drives the flint hard rain. Oh such a cold and lonely place. After absorbing the ambience of the inn and enjoying our drink we take up the path again skirting the edge of Bodmin Moor not wishing to meet its mystery in bad weather. Somewhere out there is Dozmary Pool where Sir Bedivere threw Excalibur after King Arthur was mortally wounded. In that bottomless mere, perhaps in the tunnel connecting it to the sea, lurks the Lady of the Lake who has reclaimed Excalibur and guards it for all time.

We struggle on heads bent to the wind. The wind plays tag with my hair as we follow the high open lanes giving wide views of Rough Tor and we reach Davidstowe Woods and an abandoned airfield at about 7.00pm.

In 1844, 18-year-old Charlotte Dymond worked as a milkmaid at Lower Penhale Farm on Bodmin Moor. She enjoyed the attentions of the young men in the village. This angered a young man named Matthew Weeks, who worked as a labourer on the same farm as Charlotte.

On Sunday, April 14th 1844 Matthew asked Charlotte to go for a walk with him, and she accepted. Matthew decided to take Charlotte to Lanlavery Rock, on the far slopes of Rough Tor. As they ambled along together Charlotte teased Matthew about another boy she liked. Unbeknown to Charlotte, Matthew's rage was building and he was carrying a knife.

Matthew led Charlotte to a gate leading into a farm field. What happened next was later described by Matthew: "I told her I had seen her in a situation with some young man that was disgraceful to her. She then said; 'I shall do as I like. I shall have nothing more to do with you.' I took out my knife and then replaced it. But on her repeating the phrase, I made a cut at her throat from behind. She immediately fell backwards, the blood gushing out in a large stream, and exclaimed while falling, 'Lord have mercy on me.' While she was on the ground I made a second but much larger cut though she was almost dead at the time. After standing over her body about four or five minutes, I lifted up one of her arms and it fell to the ground as if she was dead. I then pushed her body a little further down the bank. I afterwards took her bonnet, shawl, shoes and pattens and covered them up in a turf pit. Her gloves and bag I put into my pocket. In the road I threw away the knife."

At the end of April, Charlotte's body was discovered. Matthew Weeks was tried for her murder, sentenced to death, and hanged, on August 9th 1844. Shortly afterwards, local people paid for a monument to be erected on the spot where Charlotte's body had lain, with this inscription: "Monument erected by private subscription in memory of Charlotte Dymond who was murdered by Matthew Weeks Sunday April 14th 1844".

Charlotte haunts the cold and windswept place where she died, and the area around her grave in Davidstowe Churchyard. She has also often been seen at Lower Penhale Farm.

From our hill top vantage point we look out and around over the dismal countryside its colours dimmed and muted beneath a glowering sky. We can see that here there is no hope of accommodation. Oh it is so so cold. My hands are red and swollen and still my leg aches. The rather terse sign reads "Agricultural common - private land. No camping, fires, motorbikes, racing, testing, flytipping, trading, dogs" - that covers just about everything. So where are we to go, night is drawing in? The woods offer some shelter and

no-one will venture out on a night like this to find us disobeying the sign, but the trick is to find a spot that is not too wet underfoot nor gnarled with roots, then up with the tent and into our sleeping bags wearing all the clothes we can manage to put on. The night will be freezing.

Day 9 Bodmin Moor to Launceston

We awake to the coldest morning I have ever known, the tent is crisp with ice and the world outside is blanketed with a thick freezing fog. We pack up our kit and I struggle to move my hands to cook scrambled eggs. "Oh I wish I had some gloves, nobody told me it would be this cold in Spring in England" I say. "It's bloody cold enough to freeze the nuts off a brass monkey, but look at this, it's great" Philip replies. His eyes scan the cracked tarmac of the old airfield and he strides off in search of war relics. His excited exclamations come back muffled through the mist as his mind recreates the past. "I'd love to know what happened here" he says "I bet there are some stories". The sun filters weakly through the hanging mist drawing long filmy shadows from the trees and Philip's approaching form. I shiver. Why are men so entranced with war? Surely it is not exciting but a depressing waste of life and agonisingly sad. "Eggs are ready" I call.

RAF Davidstow Moor opened on the 1 October 1942. Situated on Bodmin Moor at an altitude of 970ft. The wind swept base was home to 19 Grp. Coastal Command.

In 1943 612 Squadron flew Wellingtons from the base.

Davidstow Moor was briefly home to RCAF 404 (Buffalo) Squadron who flew Beaufighters from there from the 8th May until the 1st July 1944.

No 524 Squadron reformed at Davidstow Moor on 7 April 1944, undertaking the maritime reconnaissance role. Equipped with Wellingtons 524 undertook patrols to locate E-boats, which were then attacked by other squadrons. The squadron relocated to the East Coast in July 1944.

The air base was used by the Americans and Canadians for training in the run up to D-Day and was visited by General Eisenhower during 1944

In 1952 a 2.6 mile Motor Racing track was opened on the site. Meetings were badly affected by the weather and attracted low crowd numbers. The track hosted a Formula One race in May 1955, at the last race meeting to be held there. Today the site is derelict, the runways are used by light aircraft.

www.wartimememories.co.uk/airfields/davidstowmoor.html

Our coats are dusted with ice and our faces and hands frozen. It is an effort to move your mouth to talk, so tight and cold are the muscles. 12 miles to Launceston. Quick steps soon warm our bodies and Philip jokes as we laugh and bounce our way through the cold morning. Philip has an uncanny knack of turning a difficult situation into fun. I smile at him to let him know I appreciate his wit and humour.

The day stays cold with outbreaks of rain and the ever-present icy north wind. Philip's feet begin to ache terribly as we follow the River Kensey to Launceston. There it is, I can see it, step, step, we must keep going. I think our spirits are flagging quite a bit today. Philip's feet become too painful for him to make jokes - all his strength is needed to move his feet forward. Finally the outskirts of the town loom into view and it is then only a short walk through narrow streets of plain stone cottages to negotiate the traffic on the old bridge and reach the White Horse Inn.

Launceston dates back to Celtic times and is the Ancient Capital of Cornwall. The town is dominated by a castle built by Brian de Bretagne, the first Norman Earl of Cornwall, in the 11th Century. It is the only walled town in Cornwall and was once the site of the Royal Mint.

Our room in the White Horse Inn is basic but warm and although it is only 3pm we get straight into bed to warm our bones. My leg has improved markedly. I am developing a new theory that if you have an ache or pain, you "walk it away". It seems to work for everything so far.

Philip can hardly bear to wriggle his feet so he doesn't want to move. I seek out a supermarket and replenish our supplies adding some treats to cheer him. Today was a test. I feel we have reached the pain barrier and from here our strength will grow and our stride lengthen.

Day 10 Launceston to past Eworthy

Clean hair, clean clothes and revived spirits to take on the road today but not much company for us other than a few pheasants and a multitude of rabbits. Still very very cold and a wind that cuts like a razor. Unseasonable they say but to us, just plain cold. We chat along the way, happy and laughing, our feet eating up the miles along the quiet country lanes and our hearts happy.

Philip's feet have recovered this morning and it seems that reorganising my pack has done the trick with my leg, it is improving. The bruise is beginning to fade and the pain is easing. This alone accounts for a great improvement of attitude. "There are no problems, only solutions" Philip says. The way is forward.

We stop to make a hot chocolate near a thatched cottage by a stone bridge, its arches curving over a small, fast flowing river. Perched on the old stones, possibly placed there by the Romans, we smile at each other feeling very satisfied with life.



Soon we cross the Tamar River and stop to take photos on the old, stone, Druxton Bridge. The Tamar River has formed a natural boundary between Devon and Cornwall since the

8th Century when it divided the Cornish Celts from the Saxons of Wessex. The true border, however, does deviate from the River's course. The crossing of Druxton Bridge brings our feet onto a Devonshire lane. We have now walked one county, this is an achievement, now we feel we are going places. Yahoo!! It may not be good to look at the map to see how far we have yet to go but we do and it is exciting to think of all the places ahead that will become real and hold adventures for us. No longer names on a map but earth underfoot and sunshine to the senses. This is the challenge, it is what lies ahead.

We walk mostly on winding, up and down metalled lanes today except for a long stint through a forest and over a river up through a farm. Our toil is relieved by a stop at the Visitor's Centre at Roadford Reservoir where we have a big pot of tea and some respite from the cold wind outside. Sitting at the table next to us are a husband and wife and their young son. They speak not a word to each other throughout their rather lavish tea. The air between them is colder than the wind outside. The boy fingers his food, his eyes downcast. Then they leave. I reflect on their situation feeling sad for the boy. He deserves better I think. Life's stories, they are everywhere, even in a teashop by a reservoir.

The deep valleys and tall hills of Devon, the misshapen whitewashed thatched cottages and the richness of the countryside bring change to our days. Not a B & B in sight and no camping anywhere. Villages are few and far between and those we meet have few facilities. Everything changes. We move into a new county and the countryside, the stone and style of the cottages changes, the people change, the accent changes and even the light and colour are different. It is a richer landscape in every sense.

Around 6pm we take a bridle trail up a hill by a very large farm. Huge trees line the way and everything is well cared for and has the look of the wealthy. We knock on the farmhouse door and ask the landowner if we can put a tent up. "No, no, it is much too cold, you can sleep in the barn," he beams. The barn turns out to be a converted barn, now a games room and bliss and blessed luck, it is heated. We cook some soup and then roll out our mats and prepare for sleep. The farmer comes and says he will leave his back door open so we can use the toilet and shower. There are such nice people in the world, aren't there? Trust and faith. To Philip this is a rediscovery of a goodness that he knows is there somewhere but he has not seen for a while. Philip has his own business and it is all 'cut and thrust' as they say. As for me, I have changed my mind about the landowners. I give myself the firm advice not to listen to others but judge by experience.

Here it is wonderful to be in from the cold and outside it is snowing. Yes it really is snowing!! During the night we wake to the screams of cows calving. The lights are on in the big barn and the farmer is busy.



From left to right:
Camel Trail Cornwall,
Another photo of Camel Trail,
Blossoms and Bluebells in Alne Wood,
Walking through field of Rape near Alcester,
Reflections on the Churnet Canal



Day 11 Eworthy to Hatherleigh

Still snowing!! We wake to feathery flakes falling out of a heavy grey-white sky. My, it is going to be cold outside. England is wearing its ancient fickleness for uncertainty of season with pride.

We munch through our bowl of bran (got to keep healthy on the inside too) and sip our steaming tea. A big thank you, most well thought, we say to the kind farmer and we pick up the trail on the bridleway once more. Philip mumbles and grumbles as he skirts a wide icy pool of secret muddy depth. "That pool is a mini skating rink" he says.

Sky above me is not so far above, but leaden and low. I feel I could reach into it for a handful of snow. Today we have decided to make a half-day and have only 10 miles to walk to Hatherleigh. The hedges are changing. More flowers are opening to Spring each day. The daffodils' bright heads are now drooping and tinged with brown like a worn out ball gown. We see masses of softly sun coloured primroses peeping out all over, airy drifts of unscented mayweed, petite bright spots of yellow celendines, tiny nodding blue and white violets and the odd bluebell showing its bright sapphire bells.

Hedges are intriguing, massed strings of woodland, stretched around green patches of land offering a habitat to wildlife and flowers amid the commerce of farming. There is no symmetry – all is ad hoc and this gives such charm to the landscape. Higgledy piggledy they spread, over the hills and far away. In the Bronze Age strips of woodland were left after land clearing to mark boundaries but historians claim that new hedgerows were first planted in the 1300's. You can calculate the age of a hedge by the number of species since the first planting - one for every hundred years.

We feel so much stronger now and the aches and pains of the first week have disappeared. Today's walking is extremely hilly with some appealing villages, Devon villages of malformed, age warped thatched cottages and winding narrow streets. The soft hills of Devon, surreal in their perfection, roll away around us as we climb the green. Philip wonders aloud, "I believe Devonian people have genetically stronger legs, they must have." Our spirits are high, the sun has emerged to shine away the snowy clouds and we love the land around us. We feel as chatty and bright as the bubbling noisy streams we cross.

We are staying in the yellow Bridge Inn by the River Lew in Hatherleigh. Such a pleasant town with lovely pubs. Hatherleigh has been a market town for over one thousand years and still holds a market every Tuesday.

"Let's go for a pint", Philip says and we stroll the streets in the blue shifting shadows of the afternoon discovering a lovely town with stylish pubs and a good local brew. No-one speaks to us and we ourselves are pensive in our weariness.

A small queue has formed outside the tiny fish and chip shop. The people in the queue have the look of regular fast food eaters. Pallid skin lacking tone and vitality or maybe they have just not yet shed their sallow winter shell. Sadly the fish and chips are greasy and unappetising. Bad food is such a disappointment when you walk. Hunger is a constant companion and meals anticipated greatly. "I feel grumbly" I say "let's go back to the room". We amble back from the town square and make ourselves busy washing and drying all our clothes. Our bathroom has a heater and there we hang everything. We have only two changes of clothes. Any that do not dry we will hang from our packs tomorrow to flap in the wind as we walk.

Day 12 Hatherleigh to Oldsbrough

Bright and crisp is the new day. During night it snowed and hailed and the earth is frosted and gleams crystalline in the sunlight. Off up the hill out of Hatherleigh, the first of many long Devon hills. "Oh look Philip, the hilltops are white with snow." I breathe deeply of the cold air and the walking is joy but soon low grey-green clouds swing in and the soft snow flutters to our feet. From the hilltops we view the perfection of Devonshire countryside. Deep rooted villages of no fixed grid pattern reflect the early morning light and are surrounded by spreading green farms of irregularly hedged fields, some of freshly turned earth and others a dazzling green. The hills rise and fall in all directions and many bristle with large numbers trees or smaller groves that are just beginning to show a smattering of green on bare branches. Amid this scene, life goes on routinely but we are just passers by.

We are the watchers.

All around us across the countryside people are busy with their lives, sitting down to eat a meal, talking and laughing or fighting and crying. They are working, sleeping or learning and their world may be full of love and happiness, sadness and tragedy or just be day to day boring. The history of days past is beneath our feet and nature wraps the world in its beauty and wonder for nature knows all the days of change. Life is in layers and we skirt its edges. The world passes by in slow motion and with our feet always meeting the path we are more part of the land than we have ever been before. Our bodies are beginning to tune to its rhythm and our eyes absorb all of its beauty. Life is so real, more real than I can remember. The intensity of history and nature alerts us to our own mortality and we look on the world as though this may be our last sight of it.

As we look in on snatches of life around us Philip jokingly reprimands me for musing on the lives of those we meet or see, creating scenarios and stories about them. "You're doing it again" he laughs. "Keeps you amused", I retort. This becomes a game with us and we follow on from each other enlarging and widening the stories.

We plan to walk a long way today. Regular water stops keep us going. Water is the most important part of our day and our bottles need regular replenishment. One litre an hour is recommended but I could never drink that, I would have to stop behind every hedge.

At the crossroads of many lanes we stop at a whitewashed stone cottage and Philip knocks on the door to ask for water. A fine gentlemanly farmer with silver hair and a smile crinkled face answers the door and soon we are sitting by his fire sipping tea and eating from a tin of 'special' chocolate biscuits. We chat about days long gone and the state of farming today. He tells us why we are having such unseasonable weather, "Have ye seen the blackthorn flowering? It be in the hedges with white flowers?" he asks "if it flowers afore April then there be cold cold days, and that be what we are havin' now, beint it". It seems that every flower, tree and place in England has a story or myth attached to it, some more than one. Blackthorn (Sloe) is held sacred by the fairies. The Luanthishees are the Blackthorn fairies who guard the trees. I would expect that the fairies would be pleased to frolic amongst the early flowers.

..... we are on our way again, out into the cold air and feet on the lane once more. We see how everywhere the white blossoms of the blackthorn bush fill and crowd the hedges nodding open invitation to the icy winds.

Evening finds us at Oldsbrough at the Lakes Fishing Retreat. Brian and Wendy make us very welcome and Wendy cooks a beautiful meal. Such a change to have fresh vegetables and food that has not been fried as seems the pattern of pub food. They are very proud of their property which is full of wildlife and two lakes - hence 'the fishing retreat'. I stretch my legs down beneath the weighty covers into the warm bed, ah comfort. The bathroom is littered with 'do not' signs. Who has done all these dreadful things to warrant so many signs? I wonder what tomorrow will bring. I am falling in love with walking and being so much part of the world rather than wandering automatically back and forth through my daily rut with every moment busy to breaking point.

Day 13 Oldsbrough to Cadleigh

Wendy, smelling of bacon breakfasts, meets us on the stairs. Oh well, another English breakfast, I feel we are keeping the pork industry liquid. I console myself that the food will remain in my stomach for some time and give me extra energy.

Such a sharp climb up the hill to Morchard Bishop where we enter a carpark across the road from a church and find 'The Two Moors Way'. We will walk only a small section of

The Two Moors Way is a long-distance walking route between Ivybridge on the southern edge of Dartmoor and Lynmouth on the North Coast of Exmoor, comprehensively way marked except on the open moorland sections. It has a total length of 102 miles (163 km), making it an ideal week's walk.

The Way links the only two National Parks in southern England, and crosses both of them north-south. Not surprisingly, it passes through landscape of exceptionally high quality. Not only does this include the high moorland of some of the Dartmoor and Exmoor sections, but also the deep and wooded valleys of the moorland edges and between the moors, unspoilt rural scenery with a remote and tranquil feel difficult to find elsewhere in modern times. Walking mostly not difficult, but one or two strenuous stretches; some unwaymarked open moorland requiring navigational skills.

this route as our way lies to the north. Back in the mud again, sludge slosh trudge, thick walking I call it. Nothing dismal about today though, the sun is shining. Every ray

is a blessing and when the sun comes out all the colours of the world deepen and glow. England is beautiful in all its moods but there is nothing like a Spring day, you can feel the awakening about you.

The pain in my leg has now completely disappeared and the bruise has faded to a yellow blur. Glad tidings!

The path is easy to follow, initially, but following the obvious does not always lead you right. Soon we are lost and in a bluebell wood. We stand and look about. The nodding blue heads laugh little laughs as the wind rattles them. Philip checks the compass and as we know by now, it never lies and it points its certain hand down a more than steep hill through some dense woodland. So down we slide holding the firm young trunks for support. We find our way to a little bridge which is being made slip proof by a husband and wife team. They are busy nailing chicken wire to the boards. We chat and find out he is the man who wrote the guide for this path. Guess he has a lot of interest in it and he is doing a very good job.

A metal and glass phone box stands rather inharmoniously on the rise of a small hill. "Better ring Peter and Maureen and let them know we are coming" Philip says. Peter and Maureen are old friends and once neighbours who live in Rumwell, just outside Taunton where Philip and I lived with our children for three years in the early 80's. Maureen answers. "Really, you are walking from Lands End to John o'Groats. Really.....?" They are pleased we are coming their way. "Well, that is sorted" Philip says.

The hills seem mostly up and we walk what must be the longest and steepest climb so far to Poughill, but what a view. Maybe this is the highest village in Devon? I think it must be. The countryside is an illustration from a children's book, pure colour and fantasy, and the hilltops of Dartmoor are still iced with snow. How can it be so perfect when it is so cold? This small village and parish of Poughill with its tiny steep and winding lanes was certainly not built with the car in mind. In years long gone it would have been a hilly walk to the ancient market town of Crediton, some 7 miles away. This is an olden village and was mentioned in the Domesday book as Pochehille, assumed to be derived from "the hill of a man called Pog". Isn't that great? No tourists here, no locals seem to be moving about either. Time stretches and pulls us backwards. I don't think things have changed much.

Striding on we meet Cadleigh, an ordinary village of plain houses that, like many of the villages we have passed through, has front doors opening straight out onto the street. The pub is old but looks drab. The big north wind whooshes us from its grip straight through its low front door. A small group of people are clustered around the bar. "It's not open, but come in anyway" is their cheery welcome. We are there 10 minutes and we are organised. They get us a drink and organise B & B for us at 'Maggies'. John, the loudest of the group, picks up his guitar and in a voice mellow like maple syrup, sings Irish ballads and American country. We lean back, warm, rosy hued and full of enjoyment. At opening time the pub fills with a jolly, noisy crowd who buzz around our table and assail us with bright repartee. What fun this is. Robin is the landlord, his rather handsome son, Patrick

chats with us about his overseas travels. Charlotte is behind the bar and Terese, the lady who organised the B & B, watches quietly from a corner of the room. In a village like this we would have expected a cold reception, a 'locals only' attitude, but we couldn't have been more wrong. After we eat and share our experiences with half of the pub, everyone wants to give us a lift to Maggie's. The cheery journalist with the quick wit says he would drive us, but his car is too small and anyway he has 2 broken ribs and he doesn't know where to go. Eventually after much tooting and froing and many farewell kisses, Charlotte loads us into her station wagon and drives us to the lovely 16th century Devon farmhouse where we spend the night. We had a great night with these wonderful friendly pub people.

We began this journey as an adventure, perhaps even an escape but we are discovering a real world. We are finding acceptance and great hospitality in those we meet. We are finding joy in each other and loving the great beauty of Britain. A calmness has settled upon us.

The farm is wonderful with thick stone walls and vast high ceilinged rooms. Maggie, who tags "an' that" onto every three words she says, makes us warmly welcome. We sit with her and her ancient mother before a huge fire, roaring and crackling from a large inglenook fireplace. Her mother I determine is near a century in age. She struggles to put her bony arm into the sleeve of her cardigan but Maggie is too busy with the stream of friendly words coming from her mouth to notice her mother's difficulty and so I lean over and assist. She thanks me with a toothless grin. We say "goodnight" and then it's up to a big comfy bed you could lose yourself in. Fortunately I don't lose Philip and we snuggle down in the warm to sleep. A wonderful day!!!

Day 14 Cadleigh to Culmstock

Two weeks on the road and still going!

Maggie drives us back to the Cadleigh Arms and we move on from our last footsteps of yesterday. From Cadleigh's high hill the road drops steeply into the valley and the tourists' dream village of Bickleigh spreads out along the banks of the fast flowing River Exe. For memories sake (we visited here with our children many years ago) we share a pot of tea by the window of the pub next to 'The Bridge over Troubled Waters' (said to have inspired Paul Simon) - Bickleigh Bridge Weir - and then take up the road again. "Are you walking far" queries the barman, eyeing our large packs. "Only to John o'Groats" is Philip's reply. He nearly keels over. I don't think he believes it initially.

The road leads us over many more of Devon's high hills before we reach Uffculme and the River Culme.

The morning is sunny and still but as we encounter the path by the River Culm which will lead us along its meandering line to Culmstock, grey clouds again blot the sun killing shadows. The sullied sky soon begins hammering us with lashing rain and

biting hail. Oh, it is so cold. As I raise my head and blink to see through the trickles of water that run down over my eyes, I think how enjoyable this walk would be on a sunny day. It's that fickle English Spring again. The River Culm, a shadowy steel grey, rushes along, winding and turning amid the green green fields and lovely old trees. Looking at the lay of the land I think that it could flood here at times. We cross many footbridges as the path moves from side to side of the river, following the main branch and leading us away from being trapped in the almost islands that form amongst the snaking tributaries of the river. But it is raining with a wild wrath and so I bend my head again and concentrate on avoiding the worst of the mud.

The intensity of the rain obliterates the countryside leading to confusion and we leave the river too early and have to walk along lanes to Culmstock. An old wiry bodied and brown faced man with a collie at his heels walks towards us. He stops, oblivious to the rain, to pass the time. "Where ya be gwain?" he asks. We tell him of our journey. "Ah, that be good, Culmstock be only a mile or two down yon lane". Then he moves on unmindful of the road beyond his local domain. John o'Groats is not in his vocabulary nor in his world. I wonder what it would be like to live a life so tightly bound by your community as to never venture from it. Philip looks at me, shakes his head and gives a small laugh.



Everywhere is the sound of rushing water. There must be large drains beneath the road. It is much further than we think to Culmstock but like all roads, this one has an end, before branching off on other adventures and its end is the old worlde village of Culmstock. We find the pub by the bridge where we hope for a warm bed but they no longer do B & B. So on through the softly treed churchyard to the other village pub, The Ilminster Stage. This Inn was built in the 17th century as a coaching stop or stage. It retains many of the old features that give the building its distinctive and friendly atmosphere. The landlord Peter spies us through the paned window. He opens the door. "Come in out of the cold, it's a bastard of a day, unseasonable to say the least", he says. His wife Jenny bustles off to make us tea and toasted hot cross buns. It's Easter time. The pub is fully booked but Peter and Jenny chat in the kitchen and decide they will put a sofa bed in the office for us. They sit with us and chat while we slowly thaw. Peter is very interested in our journey and we swap stories. He tells us of two elderly ladies who are also prospective 'end to enders' and passed by the pub earlier in the day. It seems they are ill-prepared and are wearing rain sodden soft canvas shoes and raincoats. He doesn't think they will make it very far. The wetness leaves our clothes and the tiredness leaves our bones. Peter ushers us through a low door up a tiny and narrow flight of steps. "Use our bath" he says "it's in there and the office is in here. Once in the office Philip turns to me with a grin and says "bet you are glad we don't have to camp tonight". The only positive thing about the inclement weather is that I have not had to sleep on the cold ground too often, as yet, that is.

From the office window there is a close and splendid view of a beautiful old church which has a naturally bonsied 300 year old yew tree growing in the mortar of the tower. The sofa bed is, however, lumpy in the extreme and I have to put my head where my feet are

meant to be in order to avoid the large rounded humps and attempt at some level of comfort.

Things have so far worked out well. Let us hope that we are watched over for the rest of our journey for we have only just begun. The kindness and generosity of those we have met along the way warms the heart and lifts the spirits. No bad news on this journey.

Day 15 Culmstock to Taunton

We walk through the churchyard in a veil of light snow and head towards the Blackdown Hills. The Blackdown Hills are a mid-range group of hills lying on the border of Devon and Somerset. "This sure beats working" Philip comments through a misty exhalation. His face smiles, though because of his cold face, his mouth turns only slightly.

Through a farm and then we strain up yet another very steep muddy hill past the Culmstock Beacon. Before electronic communications hilltop beacons were used to pass messages of imminent danger or news of celebration. England's hilltop beacon sites were kept prepared, fuelled and manned and used to pass the signal from hilltop to hilltop, community to community. Culmstock Beacon, on the top of the Blackdown Hills, is an ancient beacon site, the beacon is built from local Chert stone and is a protected Ancient Monument. At Culmstock Beacon we reach the ridge way that will take us along the top of the Blackdowns and then we turn down into the vale of Taunton. The sky clears to a patchy blue and the wind is again a northerly arctic in our faces. We feel like explorers on top of the world as we follow a bridleway across the yellow gorse covered hilltop. Lots of mud and then into a dense wood and Somerset.

Again the countryside changes as we enter another county. Somerset is more wooded and has a rustic and soft beauty. Trees grow in long lines from high, mossy and dark wet earth mounds that line the lanes and tracks. These must once have been hedges. There is a fairyland quality to our surroundings, somewhat fey and whimsical with a gentle eeriness. Wisps of mist and high keening yowls would not be out of place here. We come out of the woods onto a road and the clouds mate and give birth to large flakes of snow. The flurries turn to fast and furious. What fun! The Harrier Pub is ahead and our minds fill with visions of a bowl of hot soup and a fire to warm our toes. Open fires are a homespun saga of comfort and rest. From cave dweller to modern man, the fire in the hearth is home. Coal and wood are in our genes.

The Trull Road dips down the hill towards Taunton. This town holds so many wonderful memories for us, for here in the 80's we escaped with our then young children from the constraints of our own world in Sydney and for three years lost ourselves in the flowers, hedges and soft rain of Somerset.

Taunton, the market town of north Somerset has some fair buildings, a castle and its wide streets are planted with large drifts of brightly coloured annuals. We walk past the Norman Castle to the bus station and catch a bus to Rumwell, past our old home, Rumwell Cottage to Rumwell Mount. Peter and Maureen wait with smiles of welcome and faces full of curiosity for what we are doing.

Day 16 Taunton to Stathe

It is so lovely to see Maureen and Peter again. We inspect the pond and the summer house. The children, Tracy and Simon, now grown come by to say "hello". We sit in the sun room and look out over our old cottage. Time it passes. There is much catching up to do and the evening wears almost to morning before we say goodnight. The years apart have little bearing on the connection of friends and we are sad to say farewell.

It is two miles walk back into Taunton. A visit to the Post Office is a waste of time for our maps have not arrived. We can't wait around, we have miles to walk so we post our used maps and buy more for the next part of our journey (we will have to mark out our route again on these), some provisions at Marks and Spencers and off we head along the Taunton and Bridgewater Canal to the north east of Taunton. Steady rain falls about and on us (what a surprise!!) and the early part of the walk is rather depressing and unattractive. We stop under the shelter of a small concrete bridge where we make our morning coffee and eat some of the shortbread biscuits we bought. Food has a cheering quality on a grey day such as this and the hot mug warms my hands. A mother duck and five ducklings join us and we scatter some crumbs for them. A chilly spring for baby ducks.

We leave the canal at Creech St Michael and walk through the village of Ham to the east bank of the River Tone. The walking along this part of the Curry Moor Trail is level but is made tricky by the knee high wet grass, and still the rain comes down in great pelting sheets, dampening spirits and making the walking even more arduous and unpleasant. We can feel the rain running into our boots. Even our waterproofs can not keep it out. We are so cold and so wet. This is definitely the worst day so far. We plod on, heads down and rain rain rain all around. There is nothing much to say about this day as it is dreary in the extreme.

Evening approaches and we detour into Stoke St. Gregory in search of B & B. We are thwarted at every turn - away on holidays, renovating, full.....and so it goes on. The local shopkeeper gives us the phone number of a woman at Stathe. This is en route so we head off, and around us the evening is drawing in, dark and dismal. The prospect of camping is a woeful one, even if we could find somewhere to place our tent. All the fields are under crops and probably inches of water by now. We trudge on through the rain and the north wind blows. At the first phone box Philip rings but the phone answers with the tone of a fax machine so on we go. Another phone box stands ahead and Philip crams himself in

with his pack to make the call. Eileen answers "Yes, just around the corner, come in the back". Relief swamps my already soaking self!

Short steps (the phone box is actually within view of the farmhouse) and we stand before a beautiful 18th century Grade II listed red brick farmhouse with stone sills and a flat roofed wooden columnar porch. No B & B sign, but this is it. Stathe Mead says the sign. We walk in the back entrance past the out buildings and leave our wet gear to drip and drip in the drying room. My eyes are everywhere as Eileen walks us through her home to our bedroom for the night. We enter through an imposing panelled door and there amid the warm dry air is big brass bed. Downstairs Eileen has fire crackling and leaping with heat in the great hearth in the drawing room. We sit our skin happy to absorb the warmth. A cup of tea in hand we feel the homeliness that settles us deeply into the softness of the sofa. Golden harmony is between us. The bathroom is bigger than the bedroom and the bath could hold a family. Changed and renewed we come back down for more tea and Eileen's homemade stilton cheese and bread. "This dreadful weather has some benefits Philip", I say, knowing that if it were fine we would be camping.

Day 17 Stathe to Glastonbury

Smoked salmon, scrambled eggs and more homemade bread sitting at a magnificent table made of 300 year old elm. Unfortunately we have to enter the day and walk on.

It is brighter outside and the sunlight filters through weakly. Our legs stretch out as we stride across the Somerset levels, 250 miles of flat, wet land, the summer land of winter floods. Nowhere on the levels is above 25 feet above sea level. The sea is kept back by a coastal clay ridge. The sea once covered these levels but retreated around 3,500 years ago. In Prehistoric times islands (hill tops or tors) rose from the waters and Prehistoric man built wooden trackways to travel from one tor to another. Iron Age villages have been excavated near Meare and Glastonbury. Glastonbury Lake Village was a thriving community for hundreds of years and its remains have been well preserved in the peat.

The Romans farmed here too but the Saxons made the biggest impact and came to this area for the rich grazing and fertile lands. They chose the Tors as the site of abbeys and monasteries such as Glastonbury Abbey, the remains of which can be seen today.

The flooding water was managed by using small fields and ditches called Rhines, straightened river channels, cut into the land forming a pattern of glistening lines. These reduce the amount of water lying on the ground and beside them are clear dirt paths to follow. The levels are rich in wildlife such as otters, dragonflies, butterflies, water beetles and migrating birds. The flora and fauna include many that are rare or endangered elsewhere. All this can be appreciated as we slowly tread our even way towards Aller.

The village of Aller winds sleepily to the foot of Aller Hill where we climb steeply to Aller Wood. Aller Wood is a semi-natural ancient woodland of ash and oak overlooking King's Sedgemoor, part of the Somerset Levels. We pause to gaze out over the fascinating and flat watery landscape below. Mud, mud and more of the dark and viscous mud but the wood is lovely.

Spring is finally wakening the world of green and we can see tiny violets peeping out and the green buds on the trees are promising soon to burst bright leaves. Relaxed and feeling far from the world, we sit on an old log and have morning coffee absorbing the damp green smells of life renewing itself. "I am loving these days Philip" I say. Philip raises his head "I believe this is going to be the best thing we ever do" he says. "We will never take the tourist bus." Yes, we are enamoured with the gentle footsteps on the land for this is what it is all about, this is freedom in a beautiful world. Early bluebells nod in the breeze and promise is in the air. Promise of beauty. Happiness surges, we really are on our way. We are following Spring north through beautiful Britain.

Further into the woods we come to an area cleared of trees, the skeletons of those trees, trunk and wood, lie in neat piles in even rows. Here Philip finds me a fine walking stick, long, straight and strong to help me hold my balance in the many quagmires along the route.

We leave the wood and walk on and on by fields and through villages with cottages of grey stone flecked with yellow and neat walled gardens. Down into a valley threaded with hedges on green grassy ground and across Somerton Moor then steeply up Watton Hill from where there is a fine view of the small town of Street.

We have jobs to do in Street, a 'to do' list to complete. I volunteer and Philip sits with our packs and waits.

"I saw a tea shop up the road" I say "Sounds good to me" Philip replies. Later we trudge on along a lane on South Moor to Glastonbury.



In surreal abruptness, Glastonbury Tor rises from the flat expanse of the Somerset Levels in a rather incongruous manner, more like a watercolour impression of nature than nature herself. As we approach Glastonbury our eyes are drawn to the 500 feet, conical form of the Tor and the ruined chapel atop it which looks like an outlandish chess piece on a patchwork board of hues of green. There is no doubt that it has a numinous presence that is perpetuated by the legends that encircle it. The curious, the devout and the crazy make pilgrimages here to see the Abbey and the first Christian altar in Britain or to try and absorb some of the mystery of King Arthur, the symbol of British unity against the Saxons, and Guinevere who are said to be laid to rest here and of course to climb the magic Glass Isle, Avalon, that is Glastonbury Tor.

Not for us tonight is a climb to the Tor top, we have been there many times before, but it is a lovely evening so we decide to camp. The first camping site is closed so we have to walk another 2 long miles to the next one.

The last mile or two of each day's walking is the hardest.

We almost drag our feet as our minds have already tuned to the end and a long rest. Finally we arrive and the standard is high and the facilities excellent. Up goes the tent and dinner is soon cooked and with the setting sun the cold rises from the ground and we crawl into our tent and curl up in our sleeping bags insulated against the frosty night. And so we sleep here beneath the shadow of the mystical tor. What dreams will this night bring, close to the earth of a place so mythical and magical?

The Holy Grail

"Stories of a sacred vessel dear to the Celts became entwined with the story of Christ's Last Supper and the Christian Holy Grail which inspired quests and crusades across England, Europe and the Far East.

The Glastonbury and Somerset legends involve the boy Jesus together with his Great-Uncle, Joseph of Arimathea building Glastonbury's first wattle and daub church. These legends gave rise to the continuing cult of the Virgin on the site of the present Lady Chapel and inspired the title 'Our Lady St. Mary of Glastonbury,' which is still used today.

After the crucifixion of Jesus lore has it that Joseph of Arimathea (who according to the Bible donated his own tomb for Christ's interment after the Crucifixion) came to Britain, bearing the Holy Grail - the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper and later by Joseph to catch his blood at the crucifixion.

When Joseph landed on the island of Avalon, he set foot on Wearyall Hill - just below the Tor. Exhausted, he thrust his staff into the ground, and rested. By morning, his staff had taken root - leaving a strange oriental thorn bush - the sacred Glastonbury Thorn.

For safe keeping, Joseph is said to have buried the Holy Grail just below the Tor at the entrance to the Underworld. Shortly after he had done this, a spring, now known as Chalice Well, flowed forth and the water that emerged brought eternal youth to whosoever would drink it.

Intertwining the myths and legends of Glastonbury Abbey's history, it is widely believed that finding The Holy Grail Joseph is said to have hidden was years later the purpose behind the quests of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table."

www.glastonburyabbey.com

Day 18

Glastonbury to Binegar

Our first really sunny day! Not such a good night's sleep, the chill got in. But when sleep finally eased beneath my eyelids there was no room for dreams amid the weariness. Shake away expressions of lassitude for the day is bright and energetic!

Off we go again, walking over hill and dale. We leave Glastonbury, cross a bridge and head north east along a lane lying straight like a ruler across Queen's Sedgemoor. Now we again walk on land that is level, dotted with farms and criss-crossed with channels of water. The water sits in its channels beside the lane looking rather dead and green and a breeding place for tadpoles, fish and the insects they consume. The winter floods seem a distant thought. It is a civilised terrain, a haven for birdlife and the walking is pleasant.

We sit in the warm sun behind a hedge and by a bridge, sheltered from a chill wind and eat morning tea. Stretch those legs, mmm it is so warm here out of the wind, we feel like a sleep but the excitement of every new step is a strong enough inducement to move us along. Lunch time finds us in a village with an Inn so we stop for an hour or so and Philip enjoys a pint and we both eat roast turkey. Delicious! Food, glorious food. So hungry all the time. Refuelled we put on a good spurt of energy for the hills ahead. Along lane after lane we meander, "Let's hope the weather stays good now" Philip says. Suddenly his attention is diverted to a wide green field by the lane. Two fatted pigs copulate energetically, grunting loudly with the exertion. Philip laughs as he takes out the camera. "When we show our photos" he says "this photo will test just who is paying attention and who isn't!"

We walk on. Time for reflection listening to the sounds of spring and wondering why it all happens and who makes it happen. Thinking too how our generation and the couple before have been so rugged on our fragile environment.

Maesbury hill fort, an immense earthworks stronghold, now greened in grass, which must have been a centre for prehistoric rulers, is a highlight. We sit on the ancient earth ramparts and wonder at the history of this land and the lives of the thousands who have been here before us. We are doing a lot of wondering as we walk, I think. There have been people living here for so long, it is all so old, so many visible layers. We sit together and there is no-one else. There is no enchantment in sharing such a place with tourists. Are we classed as tourists, I wonder. I don't know how long we have been sitting here but the shadows are lengthening as we leave. Time captured us for a spell. Ancient sites hold you in their power. We climb a stile and walk down through a field of silently grazing sheep. Then it is a long straight trudge to our next campsite. The campsite is exceptionally basic and our tent looks lonely on the wide expanse of green. The shower room is freezing, concrete and a plastic shower curtain. So, in the gathering dusk, we move a picnic table close to our tent and eat our dinner with hunched shoulders and a stiff back to stop the shivers - then into bed - another cold night with ice on the tent and a crunch underfoot.

Day 19 Binegar to Bath

An early start this morning because we have a long way to go. Our destination is Bath - 15 miles hence. The sky is heavy and threatening rain. Threat becomes reality and a drizzle turns to a constant patter. These drips from the sky seem ever our companions. Where is Spring hiding today? Past Paulton to Camerton, where we walk through a gentle undulating landscape to begin to follow Cam Brook whose course will take us almost to the edge of Bath. The rain makes it difficult to appreciate the scenery which today is a mix of small and medium sized fields of rich grasslands, angular and irregular in shape with few trees. Most trees are located along Cam Brook and near buildings and villages. This would be an ideal walk on a sunny day and every turn of the water's course would beckon you to linger. But for us there is just rain and mud and

more mud. Mud that sticks and holds your feet as though wishing to swallow you. Mud to sink into and slip and slide along, grabbing at branches for support.

We follow a bridle trail and the horses heavy solid hoof fall has turned the already muddy path into a bog. We notice that this path is part of the Limestone Link. This country is criss-crossed with marked paths. It must be wonderful to be able to walk them all. What a way to enjoy your country, I envy the British.

Finally we reach a lane and as we walk we scrape our feet and wipe them in the plants and grasses that grow long and water laden on the tarmac's edge. The mud really sticks. We are longing for our first glimpse of Bath. We plan to stay there for two nights. I feel as though I am preparing for a wonderful holiday, I am so looking forward to having a day off and walking without my pack, just for a little while.

Eventually Bath, a most elegant and golden city, is laid out before us and with very sore feet we meet its footpaths which lead us to Rosemary House and our attic room way way at the top of the winding stairs. Two nights. Hooray!!! Oh, we need a rest!

But before we rest everything needs washing. Philip's socks are the worst. Phew, do they smell. He hangs his equally smelly boots from the high attic window, attaching their laces to the latch. Hopefully a bit of fresh air and sunshine will improve the odour. Oh yes, the sun has come out.

Day 20 Bath

Today is a lay day to rest our weary feet. We are staying another night here at Rosemary House.

After breakfast we walk down the hill and through the underpass to emerge in this wonderful World Heritage City of Bath.

Bath is situated by the River Avon surrounded by steep hills. Such history, so European and such beauty. A wealth of Georgian architecture built of local limestone and well preserved Roman remains combine to make Bath one of the most elegant and architecturally notable cities in Britain. The hot mineral springs on the site attracted the Romans, who founded Bath and named it Aquae Sulis dedicated to the deity Sul (Minerva). The first King of all England, Edgar, was crowned here in AD973 in an abbey built by the Saxons. The abbey was later rebuilt by the Normans. Bath has a compact centre with broad main streets, narrow alleys and baskets of flowers hanging from every available space. We wander and sigh and exclaim and sit in the spring sunshine to absorb the ambience. A happy day this. More food - coffee and cake - then we walk by the River Avon to where it tumbles from beneath Pulteney Bridge down past the park full of spring blossoms and then by Bath Abbey and the Roman Baths. We have visited Bath's historical sites before, so today we just amble. We stop in an outdoor shop

and buy me a new hiking stick, a telescopic one. Much better than the one I had. Then we buy some wine and food at Marks and Spencers and back to the room to catch up on letters and rest, rest, rest.

The Legend of Bladud

In legend it is told that Bladud is the founder of Bath and the curative waters and mud found there.

Lud Hubibras (Bladud), was a British Prince in Celtic times. As a young man at court Bladud contracted the greatly feared disease of Leprosy. Sadly, his father banished and disowned his son. Before he ventured into the wide world, away from his father's kingdom, his mother gave him a ring of gold. She told him to keep it safely for if every he was cured of the disease this ring would prove his birthright to the throne.

The prince walked widely but everywhere he went he was shunned. Eventually he came to make a meager living from swine herding. One day he noticed that some of his herd had caught leprosy. Fearing the consequences he decided to run away from his master. He took the swine and fled across the River Avon to the area where the city of Bath now stands. He wandered the area until one day one of the pigs went crazy and pitched itself into a black bog in the marshy ground. Bladud struggled to pull the pig from the bog and his body was soon pasted with the foul smelling mud. When he had finally freed himself and the pig, he found that the pig's skin lesions had disappeared, and where the mud had touched his bare skin he was also cured. He removed his clothes and immersed himself fully in the warm mud. With this treatment he was soon fully cured of the disease.

Finally, Bladud returned to Court, where he was welcomed with open arms by his mother, who recognised the ring she had given him many years before. Bladud ruled wisely as King for twenty years. He founded the city of Bath, and created the temple of Aqua Sulis dedicated to Minerva.

He was purported to have been a man of great learning, he journeyed across Europe and studied in Athens, later bringing much Greek wisdom back to Britain. He came to grief when a magical experiment failed. He wanted to fly so he built himself some wings, and was airborne over New Troy when they gave way and he crashed to the ground. That was the end of Bladud.

This is decadence - propped on a mound of pillows with bare feet and a royal spread of food and wine before us. I wriggle my toes as I pop another delicious morsel into my mouth and ponder on tomorrow, for tomorrow we begin the first of our long distance paths - the 100 mile Cotswold Way. Now the adventure really begins.

Day 21 Bath to Cold Ashton

My birthday!

Off we go on the Cotswold Way. The Cotswold Way has its beginnings by the Cathedral in Bath and then for 103 miles it follows the Western edge of the Cotswold escarpment to Chipping Campden. It is an undulating route, with its highest point at Cleeve Cloud (just over 1,000 ft), which weaves its way through green and gentle countryside featuring low limestone hills and agricultural valleys and it is designated an area of outstanding natural beauty.

This will be a moderate introduction to Britain's long distance trails. In medieval times this was a prosperous wool area and along our way we will find solid houses of local

limestone, wealthy towns and villages, picturesque pubs, and ancient sites from prehistoric and Roman Britain. Our feet will follow the shadowy footsteps of millenniums of Cotswold dwellers.

Following the small white way marking dots that appear on posts and stiles or beside the yellow public footpath markers or blue bridleway markers we head north out of the town to Primrose Hill then down to Weston and up into the countryside. The weather is poor - again a dismal grey sky, clouds heavy with rain. The mud is thick on the ground as we gain the escarpment and trek across the hilltops. We breathe deeply of the moist air and the beautiful Cotswold hills are laid out before us. We do not put on our gaiters and I am being too careful trying to pick my way through the mud to keep my clothes clean. A silly and vain hope. The path, a bridleway, runs between two wire fences and is churned by horses to a slick ooze of mire. My foot slips from under me, my pack shifts my balance from centre. Down I go, the whole of my weight landing on my thigh as it hits the taut wire of the fence. The hot pain runs up my thigh and my eyes momentarily lose vision. I open my eyes to see Philip chatting to two healthy looking men up ahead, a father and son who are almost to Bath and the completion of the Cotswold Way, walking from the other end. Groan, my face grows hotly red. I am embarrassed. The bruising will be horrendous, I know. The older man strides through the mud to help me to my feet. He must wonder how this silly woman is going to make it all the way to John o'Groats. I stand up straight and thank him then carry on walking, holding my leg stiffly and masking the pain. Oh yes, it really does hurt.

We walk on, albeit somewhat more carefully, climbing stile after stile through the green hills. The views are wide and panoramic but it begins to drizzle and another soft day is upon us. When will this rain end? Mustn't let it get us down, after all this is England and England is synonymous with rain.

We arrive in Cold Ashton at around 4pm and ring a farmhouse B & B from the phone box (we have a list of Cotswold Way accommodation) - no luck, the answering machine is on. I hang up and just as I am leaving the phone box the phone rings. I stop abruptly and my mind goes blank. "Well answer it," Philip says. It is a man named Malcolm from Rectory Farm - the number I had just rung and yes he has a room. The wonders of technology! He meets us at the back of the church and takes us to his farm and our room. Muddy boots and gaiters (I put them on after my little accident) are left at the door and then upstairs and into a hot spa bath. My leg has a huge black bruise extending almost the whole length of my thigh but the bath is very pleasing! All clean and neat we wander down to the White Hart Inn at the end of the drive and eat an enormous dinner. I order dessert. "I'll have the spotted dick please". I can't stop laughing. The waitress begins to laugh and with a twinkle replies "a spotted one is it, sure then you'll enjoy that" When it comes it is a neat steamed pudding dotted with currants and floating in custard.

Day 22

Cold Ashton to Hillersley

Malcolm lives alone in his big farmhouse but the many spaces around him are filled with pictures of his family. I wonder where his family are? He is not very chatty and has an aura of an inner sadness. He waits upon us most efficiently at breakfast and soon we are walking down his drive to cross the main road to pick up the Cotswold Way once again by the White Hart Inn.

More mud, fields of it but the day is warmish and so far dry. This is a walk of enchantment by stone walls and through fields thick with spring grass and brightly contrasting yellow dandelion blooms. At times our direction is aided by large white plastic discs nailed to a 'hard to spot' stile in the far corner of the very wide fields. We plan to walk 15 miles today and so not much time for breaks. Our legs climb so many stiles, some wood, some stone. From a stone stile by a lane under a Cotswold Way sign we quite literally slide down a steep slope, turn a corner and are captivated by the land ahead. Rising away into the distance lie fields of green heavily flowered with the sunshine circles of the yellow dandelions and tiny white yellow centred daisies. Huge trees run up the slopes and cap the hilltops. The dandelions are so yellow, the grass so green and the form and balance of the scene is such that I have to stop and breathe deeply trying to absorb some of its pure beauty to take with me through life. It is a joy to be here together, these are precious days. There is companionship in silence as well as chatter for these are not only days of love and friendship but days of reflection.

Back comes the rain, our ever present drippy companion. We hardly see a soul all day. After reaching a hilltop monument, framed by its own little park and trying unsuccessfully to determine its purpose, we divert from the Cotswold Way to find accommodation at Hillersley. It is downhill all the way and the Fleece Inn is a 17th century public house which has retained the character and tranquillity of a typical local village pub. Inside we find a jolly customers and a cosy atmosphere. Philip has a sore bottom (he refers to it as "blazing arse") and goes to soak in the bath. I think it is his waterproofs causing the problem. The persistent rain means we hardly take them off and they make you sweat. This room is a friendly room, blue and yellow like a sunny day.

Day 23

Hillersley to Uley

Free, I feel so free. I wake to more grey skies but the feeling of freedom surmounts any dismal thoughts trying to creep through the cracks of my happiness. We have nothing to consider but how far we will walk, what we will eat and where we will stay. The weather is a secondary consideration and its changes only add to the adventure.

Mud, so much mud. So much that your feet stick and each step is a suction pop. We walk from Hillersley to Alderley and then up through a spring green budding leaved

wood which clings to Wortley Hill like bristles to a brush. The bluebells growing beneath the trees cast a misty blue-purple haze across the forest floor and every day it seems more leaves are beginning to show their new green to the sun. The bluebells are my favourite spring wild flower. They shine only when they grow in profusion, each reflecting her neighbour's blueness until that blueness becomes electric shifting and dancing between the bells. In life most of us are like those bells, shining because of each other. Few can stand alone.

Seem to be some steep climbs today but each is rewarded with a fabulous view. The sky is heavy and soft rain falls veiling the view to a muted emerald and softening the outlines. We have something to eat at Wotton Under Edge which for me does not live up to the poetry of its name. I somehow expected to see Toadhall and a storybook scene. Then more woods, more mud along Nibley Knoll to North Nibley. We meet a man and his wife walking in the opposite direction "There's a baaaastard of a field up ahead, thick mud and a steep slope, a real bastard of a field", he warns. When we reach this field we find it mild to what we have come through and wonder how he is feeling stuck in the mud further back along the way.

We take a short cut to avoid the golf course and at Dursley buy some food for dinner. A wee bit footsore we trudge on, this is a long day and heavy underfoot. Lots of climbing but the steepest and highest is yet to come. We climb what feels like stile 999999 and look up. Oh my, a sudden interruption to the landscape in the form of a steep grassy peak fills our vision. It is Cam Peak. One step in front of the other, we daren't look down. We really need our hiking sticks here as it is like walking up an oiled slippery dip. The path is narrow and worn smooth as glass by the fall of many feet. The green grass is eaten almost to the roots allowing the mud to show through offering no firm hold to our boots. Grass is resolute, no matter how downtrodden it grows again to stand tall under the sun. A bit like the human race, really. I push my stick firmly into the earth, leaning heavily on it as I pull up the hill. Eventually we gain the rather small flat summit expecting an equally steep descent but the path slopes away gently and then rises again over Cam Longdown. We walk along the ridge and are stunned by the isolation, the ancient beauty and the fabulous view.

Out in the valley civilisation clusters and sprawls but upon the ridge the land is old and time weathered and the scene could equally be the stage for many stories of history. We breathe deeply of the cold air. Philip exhales saying "this is fabulous, we will come back here one day when the sun is shining and have a picnic". I smile. We might be old then.

The way down to Hodgecombe Farm is steep and again slippery but what a beautiful room and a wonderful welcome awaits us in a traditional Cotswold stone farmhouse owned by Katherine and Geoff. "Come up to the barn and we'll hose off that mud" says Geoff. It is a group effort as the mud is copious. As we stand hosing and scrubbing Geoff recounts the story of another couple who came this way one rainy night, not long ago. "They knocked on the door and asked to sleep in the barn" he said "they were a young fellow and a lass and they were drenched". So into the barn they went and as the evening progressed the sky threw more rain at the earth and the wind came up. It was cold. "We invited them

into the house and put them in the double guest room upstairs” Geoff smiled “but their attitude was uncertain and standoffish, we couldn’t understand it. We expected them to show gratitude.” The next morning over breakfast it was discovered that the two young people had only met on the trail an hour before arriving at the house. We all laughed. No such problem with Philip and me, we can’t wait to get into that double bed and snuggle up to sleep the dark away!

Day 24 Uley to Standish Wood

What a surprise, it is raining again! Delicious breakfast, happy conversation with our hosts and homemade jam, made by Geoff. We say goodbye and set off climbing steeply out of the valley through a young wood, the usual glutinous mud underfoot. Thank goodness for our walking sticks!

We pass Uleybury, strategically sited at the south end of a steep sided spur commanding far and wide views. Uleybury, one of the finest examples of a promontory fort in Britain, was built in the iron age and shelters a 32 acre rectangular sanctuary. As we make our way along the path on the side of a steep hill a small herd of curious soft eyed cows plod along behind us and we slog on ahead of them through mud, urine and green cow dung all mixed to divine disgust by the ever present rain. The cows follow us to the stile where their great bodies mill and bump. I wonder how long they will stand there before one turns and the others follow. And they say sheep are mindless!

More climbing to Coaley Peak and another magnificent view. It goes forever, we are kings of the world, we are flying even though we have our feet firmly anchored in the mud. “With brains in your head and feet in your shoes, you can go anywhere”.

The rain is sweeping in and it is too wet to stop and make tea. “I’ve got that bloody blazing arse again” Philip says wriggling in discomfort. I giggle. “Sorry” I say.

Every day adds to our amazement. After the ancient fort we pass a couple of Neolithic barrows but the rain drives us on. An unbelievable amount of mud today. “We must be mad”, Philip keeps saying “We must be bloody mad.” The way takes us through some delightful woodland and we stop for tea in a town, which has not proved to be memorable, in the tea shop of a gardening centre. Two pots of tea and two big plates of baked beans on toast. Always so hungry. After our break the clouds begin to thin and the sun breaks through and what is that? Blue cellophane sky, wonderful!! The temperature changes with the weather and it turns warm and we are down to our t-shirts. We stop on a hillside to change. So much of our time is taken up by taking our clothes on and off. Sometimes this happens at 15 minute intervals. It seems we encounter a different climate over every hill. Now Philip feels more comfortable as the air can circulate. We definitely don’t like our waterproof trousers.

More steep climbing and the woods atop the hill are full of bluebells. Neat stone walls criss cross and wind without symmetry over the hilltops through Three Bears Wood and into

Standish Wood. We plan to camp in Standish Wood at Haresfield Dyke Camp a fortification of both the Romans and the Britians.

We pass more fortifications. This is Ring Hill camp which encloses 10 acres and may have been used as a Roman signal station.

We are thinking we will not find the camping place but a neat little sign on the path shows the outline of a tent and points to the right. Haresfield Dyke Camp, once a sanctuary from a wild world, is now an untidy field which shows evidence of old campfires. The retired caretaker comes by and laments the state of the place and how it has been ruined by young larrikins. We have the field to ourselves, however and so up goes the tent.

Dinner is cooked and eaten in record time for the day is shrinking to night and has become cold and unwelcoming. Outside the chilly shadows flit but we are warm in our sleeping bags sheltered from the wind that still blows coldly from the north. What a surprise!! Let's hope it stays fine.

Day 25 Standish Wood to Coopers Hill

Mist lies over the woods like a bride's veil, hinting beauty and full of promise which is soon fulfilled when the sun breaks through revealing blue sky. We break camp and set off through the woods, the day stays fine but we are still rather tired. We take a bit of a shortcut and find our way through another wood back to the way at a road which we cross to old Scottsquar Hill Quarry. The ravaged earth of beige and brown is like a rough scar on the land and gives stunning contrast to the beautiful valley beyond. The coarse, rough and barren quarry leads the eye to a valley so green and picturesque. Cotswold honey coloured oolitic limestone farmhouses with colourful patchwork fields both bright and soft in shade surround and spread into the distance. More of the Cotswold stone buildings of varying size and shape and the 15th century St. Mary's church with an imposing spire cluster high on the hill between two valleys and stray from its edges.

A gipsy in bright but grubby garb with wild tangled hair driving a horse drawn Romany caravan appears out of the quarry but his countenance is surly and he turns his horse away from us and clatters off down the lane. Another world, another layer, this one clearly in the present but likely wishing to be elsewhere.

The distant village is Painswick and we buy lunch there in a tea shop. The food is good, but expensive and I don't think walkers are particularly welcome there but the place is virtually empty so perhaps no one is particularly welcome. Painswick is, to me, the quintessential Cotswold village, wealthy and proud, streets with an eye for the tourist. The beautiful old St. Mary's Church stands in the centre surrounded, according to tradition, by almost 99 ornamentally clipped 200 year old yew trees (there are supposed to

be 100 but the number hovers at 99 and every time a 100th tree is planted, one dies) which form maze like long avenues contrasting darkly with the light grey limestone of the church and village buildings. The yews are clipped every year in September and on the following Sunday a 'clipping ceremony', which dates back to pagan times, takes place.

More food purchases in the tiny village shop amid local discussions of the funeral of a friend held that morning. A group of more than middle aged women discuss the service in an open and friendly banter that completely fills the spaces between the groceries and fresh produce. "What hymns were sung?" questions one of the ladies. The response is a sudden burst of song, loud, long and tuneful, encompassing full verse of the hymns from the service. This is a marvellous acceptance of mortality and the celebration of life. These women belong to life and eye its limitations with candid care. I am intrigued. Tonight, loaded with provisions of a very English nature, we will make for Birdlip.

We leave Painswick and walk over the hills to the 'cheese rolling' hill which is a protected area and walking is prohibited. They don't need to forbid me from going down, I should think the only way you could go down there would be head over heels. On this treacherous slope every Spring Bank Holiday Monday some crazy people race or maybe hurtle down the grassy slope chasing a rapidly rolling Double Gloucester cheese. I guarantee there would be many a sore head at the end of that day but whether from the race or the celebration afterwards, I am not sure.

Cheese Rolling at Cooper's Hill

The origins of 'cheese rolling' are hazy. One notion is that it began as part of a pagan festival to celebrate the onset of summer. Other theories are that it was part of fertility rites, the anticipation of a successful harvest or as a safeguard of commoners' rights for the inhabitants of Cooper's Hill.

It is a dangerous and crazy event. On the last Monday in May, contestants stand at the top of the precipitous 250 meter hill that has a gradient of two in one. The Master of Ceremonies counts them down.

'One to be ready

Two to be steady

Three to prepare', at which time an invited guest launches the chunk of cheese on its downward pilgrimage, then

'Four to be off.'

The participants (up to twenty mad people per heat) hurtle down the hill in pursuit of the rapidly rolling round of cheese. They tumble, somersault, bump and bruise their way down, as though they have also been hurled randomly down the hill like so many floppy dolls. But of course, the cheese wins. It is impossible for contestants to keep to their feet resulting in many broken bones, sprains and bruises.

Four races are held on the day, including an event for the ladies. The prize for winning? You get to keep the cheese!

The path leads us via a small wood to Cooper's Hill and the Haven Tea Gardens, a rather untidy little timber house which perches on the edge of the hillside below the path. Its English cottage style garden, a mix of flowers and vegetables, tumbles down the hill and geese honk a warning at the bottom end in the field. The views are splendid. We enquire about B & B and all is OK. This is Rosie's place, Rosie being a very quaint elderly lady whose odds and ends tea room is available, mostly to walkers. The place is ramshackle and untidy but has an eccentric charm in spite of the rusting water tank and posies of

wilting flowers, sitting on uneven tables under a make do shelter, some set among little stones in a childlike arrangement. And there are cats everywhere. We have some tea and then Rosie takes us through her house to our room. She apologises for 'the muddle' but it really is a case of breathing in and making yourself as skinny as possible to fit through the stacks of books, clothes and various odds and ends piled up everywhere.

The room holds an ancient double bed with a saggy mattress and faded bedspread crammed in beside a set of bunks, a dressing table and a wardrobe. The wardrobe is piled high with junk and every drawer is crammed. Cat hair covers your clothes wherever you sit. Now Rosie is a charming character but the fur of cats makes me unwell. I can not sleep in this room so Rosie very kindly allows us to camp in her garden and we sleep the sleep of the exhausted, blissfully unaware of the falling rain until we awake the next morning. Oh the fresh air is such a relief.

Another positive thing is that Philip's bottom is better.

Day 26 Coopers Hill to Dowdeswell Reservoir

Tiny rivulets of rain run down the outside of the tent and we are loath to meet the day. However, meet the day we do and gentle, grey haired Rosie makes us tea which we drink before setting off once again. The rain dissipates to a light mist and a mile or two down the track we stop in the ancient and semi natural woodland of Witcombe Wood and cook ourselves some scrambled eggs and tomatoes for breakfast. This we eat with great chunks of thickly buttered bread washed down with more steaming tea. Very Famous Five!!

High on this escarpment there is good drainage and the mud is not so bad. It is such a pleasure to have firmer ground beneath our feet and so enjoyable to look around without the rain marring your vision. We pass a Roman villa on our left then walk on through the lovely woods. This is to be the benchmark for the rest of the day which passes peaceably as we walk amongst the trees. An American walker wearing an extra coat of cat's hair is our companion for a while - yes, he had also spent the night at Rosie's. He is walking for a week or so as part of his holiday. Walking on this woodland path is so satisfying to the senses - mosses grow everywhere in the damp and the trees are strong and tall. In the summer this would be a gently wooded place of shifting breezes and rustling summer leaves but for now it is still skeletal but wonderful as we walk through the filtered sunlight in the soft cool wind. Yellow flowered fields and soft green grass make for a change of scenery, but it is an easy day and the fine weather lifts us and we laugh and chat as we stride along. We cross the main road and head down a lane to Dowdeswell Reservoir and our B & B for the night. Yes they have vacancies and also camping. Philip would like to camp but I am all for a warm bed tonight and a hot shower.

Day 27
Dowdeswell Reservoir to Haile

The bed is warm and the room cosy. The alarm beeps for 7am and I pull back the curtains to reveal blue skies. What a difference the weather makes.

The path uphill at the edge of Dowdeswell Wood, is steep and muddy but from there the walking is a joy and the countryside shimmers with colours pure. Green hilltops by stone walls, over stiles and through kissing gates and hunting gates we go. "Is that a bull?" Philip asks as we climb into a field. A fatted cow lazily casts its eye over us then continues grazing. "No", I laugh.

We decide to take a shortcut up an extremely steep bridleway by a bare wood, its floor still heavy with last year's leaves. At the top we sit on a stone wall and make our coffee and I do some running repairs on Philip's map case. A Dalmatian wanders up and down eyeing our morning tea but eventually his owner comes by and they walk off across the fields together.

Through a gate and into Cleeve Common, a butterfly conservation area. The butterflies still asleep somewhere in the gorse covered moorland. A butterfly's life is serendipity. It is such a fragile creature. Does it know when a flower is red, or yellow, I wonder. Where does it go in the rain?

Cleeve Common was the site of an Iron Age hillfort and is a wide-ranging area of unimproved limestone grassland on the Cotswold escarpment.

Small hills growing stunted trees rise away from the path and then we find ourselves once again in green fields which lead on to more moorland. Philip's compass reading is excellent and a shortcut brings us back to the Cotswold Way once again. Rabbits hop about in great profusion, stopping to stare at us before leaping away or darting down their burrows. This is a wonderful day, this is a dream and a delight. Happiness is walking.

Coming over the hill to Winchcombe we dally to inspect Belas Knap, a Neolithic 55 metre hump shaped long barrow which we bend low to enter and sit a while on some large stones contemplating the awesome span of history we have intruded upon. Belas Knap has four burial chambers formed of upright slabs. They contained the remains of 38 human skeletons, together with animal bones, flint implements and pottery from the end of the Neolithic or New Stone Age, circa 2000BC. There is no one else about. It is ours to enjoy but the stones are cold for those that lay here were disturbed, their bones prodded and examined, lying now on stainless steel beneath bright lights or secreted in labelled boxes. The air shifts. Philip's warm human hands touch mine. "Let's go" he says.

Fast paced walking leads us down the wooded hill to an empty car park. Large signs warn of theft. In the trees by the car park a blue van is parked. The van's back door

swings slightly ajar. A swarthy and unshaven man peeps out. "The thief?" Philip whispers. We hurry on.

A Roman villa sits enclosed by a stone wall and set amongst a small copse of trees amid a huge furrowed field. England's air is "stirred and shaken" with ghosts of thousands of years. I am dizzy from all this history.

By the side of this field we follow a hedged farm track down a hill and before us from amid its retreat of splendid trees peeps Sudeley Castle, its windows winking in the sunshine. The lovely town of Winchcombe lies at its entrance. Walking is all the more pleasurable as it is yet too early in the year for the hordes of tourists who I am sure must populate these beautiful places in the summer season.

We are following a path used by pilgrims of many centuries as we pass the remains of the 13th Century Cistercian Haile Abbey to find the fruit farm which is listed in our book as having camping facilities for Cotswold Way walkers. As we trudge up the farm track we meet a boy and a girl leaving by car. They stop and point us in the direction of a field. "The camping is down there", they say. Off we go down the hill. It is a virtual swamp. The water is lying in muddy pools and we slosh through. "This is crazy, what do they think they are playing at. We can't camp here" Philip says. We feel low and disheartened and walk around and around peering across the vast wetland for somewhere to put the tent up. The only place is a small rectangle of gravel built up from the level of the field at one end of which is a standpipe. The tent fits perfectly and we crawl in, eat a sketchy cold meal and try to get some sleep.

Distant rumblings awaken us. Within minutes a storm is raging and the night is clamorous with wind. Lightening crackles and flashes amongst dark thunderheads, lighting the tent's inside with a cool beige light in which I can just discern Philip's rumpled face. Great claps of thunder menace our sanctuary and make us draw closer together to hug each other to sleep. Rain and hail wallop the tent but sleep takes us quickly and we stay dry and warm.

Day 28 Haile to Broadway

Bird song fills my senses. We had set the alarm for 5am but awake to the wild birds' dawn chorus well before and anxious to leave this marshy field we pack up in record time. The rain and hail have disappeared and the storm has washed the sky to a clean clear brilliant blue. It is a beautiful morning.

The path leads us steeply up hill through Hailes Wood, a forest of spring. Green hangs hazily in the air and we breathe of its freshness. Strong legs carry us to the top of a long line of hills. The fields are full of lambs and perfect green rises to meet perfect blue. The top of the hill is Beckbury Camp, an iron age fort. At the ridge edge is a stand of mature trees and a monument of unknown origins. So perched here, high on the beautiful land

in the golden morning light we make our peanut butter rolls and heat our milky coffee. Magical is the only word that can describe these moments which will forever be captured in my memory. The fact that it is freezing cold does nothing to detract from the exhilaration we both feel. It is truly a new day in every sense of the world.

Philip takes out the map. He smiles at me, his eyes bright "What do you say we only walk to Broadway" he says "we'll be there by 11am and we can have a break and clean everything" "B & B" I grin "Yes" he says.

The walking is truly wonderful, nature is a master artist. Our way is over green fields and through tiny sleepy villages. Lower Coscombe and most particularly, Stanton, are utterly charming. As we walk through Stanton's narrow streets which are lined in a higgledy piggledy fashion with 17th century houses of golden limestone and steep gabled roofs, we are under the spell of history. The walls of the cottages are webbed with creepers and bright flowers boil over the low stone walls. Stanton looks today the same as it looked when it was built and its beauty will be preserved into the future. This is a residential village without tourist shops and restaurants. There is a solitary pub, The Mount Inn and a classic medieval village church, St. Michael's. We tramp on through the shimmering green countryside and reach Broadway at 11.30am and book into a B & B.

Broadway is completely sightseer territory. From the village green to the end of the gently climbing High Street it is worthy of movie set status for period films. The sun warms the honey limestone of the elegant Cotswold houses. Dickensian shop windows are full of attractive goods to lure the tourists. The variety of architectural styles adds to the historical aspect. Steep gables, dormer windows in cottages, bay windows, thatched roofed cottages and timber on weathered stone. I wish I had days to lift the layers of time to reveal the stories and exploits of the everyday lives of the maybe thousands of years of life in these villages. Imagine for a moment the hidden stories beneath the stones of this one town.

The Village Green

Throughout the centuries the village green has served as the hub of village local life and recreation. Crowned May Queens and children dancing around the maypole, village fairs, games and the bon fires of November all took place on the village green. It wasn't all fun on the green, there were lockups, stocks and whipping posts for the correction of wrong doers.

The origins of the village green are obscure but it is believed that they were conceived in medieval times to enclose the village livestock, which were impounded at night against wild predators and human poachers. There was usually a pond which was home to ducks and geese and provided drinking water for livestock. In later times a pump provided for both humans and animals

Sandy, the more than helpful landlady of our B & B, allows us to do our washing in her machine and after we finish our tidy up we explore the town and eat dinner in a 17th century pub. We feel good, our equipment and clothes have had a Spring clean. This place is so civilised.

5 miles to go until we finish the Cotswold Way and then we begin the Heart of England Way. We have now walked 330 miles. It is difficult to comprehend when neither of us

has ever done any long distance walking before. It is also quite humorous to consider that our camping experience prior to this adventure consists of two nights by a remote beach in a National Park in Australia - and that beach turned out to be swarming with naked men! So for us, our fitness programme for 12 months, plenty of research on the net and a quick course in compass reading was the main preparation. The rest we learn as we go. We have so far coped so well. We are tired, certainly, but there have been no problems to slow us down, not even a blister.

Day 29 Broadway to Long Marston

Happy shafts of sunlight light the tiny tearooms at the front of this lovely old house as we move in farewell through the door to leave the comely tourist trap of Broadway for the last leg of the Cotswold Way. Such a feeling of amazement that we have come this far.

Arrive in Chipping Campden around lunchtime and find the Post Office to pick up maps for the next leg of our journey. The used maps we post back. We bought a Heart of England Way guidebook in Broadway.

Chipping Campden, an old wool merchants' town is another wealthy, golden stoned town of characteristic Cotswold architecture and this is also very much a 'tourist town'. We have seen the Cotswold limestone in many shades, from weathered grey to off white to deep gold in the villages we have visited but here, as in Stanton, is the rich honeyed stone that glows golden in the sunshine and makes you sigh with contentment. It all seems too perfect to be real. Even so, I prefer the wilder and more out of the world places where I can turn and not be standing in someone else's space.

We sit on a seat in the centre of town close by the old Market Hall, a covered open market built in 1627 of the ubiquitous golden stone with an arched and timbered roof. This small building appears on postcards as the symbol of this town and in those pictures probably also represents the strength and wealth of the Cotswold area which came from the richness of its farming and markets. Chipping is olde English for 'market' or 'trading centre' and the dealing has been going on here for centuries. We watch the men and women as they cross the divided High Street, the Market Hall in the middle, in long strides, busy with their own purpose. They are still dressed for winter in warm coats, some in dark sombre tones others in bright red, much more sensible as one would need a bit of cheer from the winter woes. We go unnoticed as this town draws many kinds of people from the outside world and being the meeting point of the Cotswold Way and the Heart of England Way, walkers would be a common sight.

Our feet are moving well, we are covering the ground. Philip studies the map of Britain which outlines the area covered by each Ordnance Survey map and its number. He colours in the maps we have used and we can see a wide path forming up the map. "Still a very long way to go he says". An ending and a beginning. Now the next trail awaits us. The Heart of England Way, a 100 mile green route across the West Midlands, begins at

Bourton on Water but we will join it here in Chipping Campden. The countryside ahead will be flatter, low lying country with woodlands, canals and farmland. It will be the expected vision of 'completely English'. Shakespeare Country. The way will lead us northwards across the Avon Valley to the Forest of Arden where our minds can play in the scenes of Shakespeare's writings. Then North again we will enter the flat and fertile Tame valley and cross over it to Lichfield. From there we will turn west and climb into Cannock Chase. When we reach the Glacial Boulder we will leave the Heart of England Way for the wilder country of the Staffordshire Way.

As I look around me at the obvious storybook beauty and think of the span of years that humans have lived and worked amid these buildings of mellow time worn stone, I wonder how many of the present inhabitants appreciate the depth and history of their surroundings. Are they in raptures of awe of this backdrop to their lives or is wonder restrained by over exposure and routine. I suppose that generalisation is impossible, it would be like generalising about love.

My bottom muscle is very sore today and walking is painful, however we trudge on.

We take up the Heart of England Way in a tiny and extremely narrow lane through an old gate down past the High School, then over a stile and into a field. After some muddy fields by Mickleton Hills farm we enter a beautiful boulevard. The leaves are on the trees and the trees are magnificent. I am enchanted. Suddenly honey stone is gone and warm red brick and timber, thatch and charm, old trees resplendent in the sunshine, and soft gently folding countryside of Shakespeare's wanderings is where we walk. Oh the bliss of level walking. The leaves really are on most of the trees and up in their hugeness they rustle in the wind as we pass. "This is great" Philip says "level walking. This will be a breeze".

The guide book is excellent and we wander on unerringly. This walk is so well marked a baby could follow it. Philip says I'm quiet but I am in some pain and yet also drawn into my surroundings. We walk on passing a couple of Americans who had hired a bicycle but got a flat tyre. They bend in intense interest over the wheel. Lovely farmland stretches out in all directions and we find watery places - ponds with willows gently dipping their branches into the mirrored surfaces and languid streams. We see fair thatched houses, time trodden villages with perfect village greens and neat houses facing the square. All very olde world and absolutely enchanting.

Accommodation is hard to come by, several phone calls are to no avail. Door knocking yields no answer and so we walk on and on. Very tired and the area is so populated that we wonder if we will find anywhere to camp. Eventually with evening drawing in we walk through another village and through a narrow space between the back of the pub and the building behind, cross a stile and a field and come to a small flat green place over another stile and surrounded on three sides by hawthorn hedges. Beyond this secret corner is a field of golden Rape. We sit and eat our dinner of fresh rolls, peanut butter, biscuits and mushroom soup and wait as long as we can before putting the tent up. On the other side of the hedge a man in green wellingtons carrying a rifle strides home. We

see only his legs through the scantily leaved bottom of the hedge and watch the gun swinging and tapping his boots as he walks. We are silent as he passes and he doesn't notice us, probably intent on getting in out of the cold and having his dinner. We hope we will sleep well and not be disturbed. Goodnight.

Day 30 Long Marston to Alcester

Sleepy eyed at 6am, mouths in a straight line and hands busy we pack and by 6.30am we are making our way past the field of tall yellow rape flowers. The pollen dusts us a speckled yellow like two golden bantams. Lucky neither of us suffer with hay fever as we follow a foot width thin path through the centre of the field. Not enough water for tea so just a few gulps and an empty stomach to take us on our way. The walking is still very even and very pleasing. A week ago much of this ground was deep in floodwater but already the mud has set to firm, the fields amazingly are even greener and have deepened to bright emerald contrasting magnificently with the dazzling yellow of the fields of rape. The flowers emanate heavily a perfume of spring and the countryside is dotted with lovely cottages, churches and trees bursting with blossom. Birds abound and their song fills the air. The light puffs of wind, now cool and in the North East, blow the blossom, many shades of pink and soft white, across our path as we walk. We meet two older but tall, strong ladies dressed for a long outdoor walk, by a hedge on the side of a hill. They stop to chat. They live away on the other hill. The younger one has hair like a golden banksia bloom, all ends. I like her scatty look. If they had rounded the corner one minute earlier they would have found me squatting by the hedge and Philip legs askance, trousers down. "They were probably doing the same thing on the other side of the hedge" Philip comments. The bird's eye vision this creates makes me laugh. Really, we lose all care of such things. We are living a life without walls. We walk on smiling and laughing, we ourselves in a bubble of light-hearted atmosphere.

Bideford on Avon presents a picture as we approach, a lovely somewhat squat church and tall houses standing close in a crowd by the glassy river upon which swans float beneath a 15th century stone bridge.

A great treat - we find a Bakery/cafe serving breakfast and friendly townsfolk enquire our business. We are in conversation with the whole cafe. Food is a major fixation and we devour it. The patrons of the cafe cheerily wish us well as we leave and on again we go through cramped passages, broad and narrow lanes and wooded paths. We come to a lovely old red brick bridge which arches lazily over the crystal River Arrow which true to its name, shoots, froths and skims over its stony bottom to become smooth and glassy before surging over a weir on the other side of the bridge. We climb up the path beside the bridge to a country inn - The Fish - in the village of Wixford, where we have a drink amid myriads of dried flowers, cluttering knickknacks and watch with interest the fastidious landlord who constantly picks and pokes, tidies and fusses. He likes life in straight lines. His eyes are everywhere and Philip is very amused by his doings. Me, I pity his wife. He is less than pleased when we only order a couple of pints of orange squash.

Out into the sunshine again past a tumbledown caravan park along an untidy path of nettles and finally through fields into Alcester, a mixed architecture market town whose history extends back to the Romans. It has a medieval street pattern and many ancient properties including some lovely half timbered Tudor buildings. What a treat is the walk along Malt Mill Lane. Such an abundance of cottages from the middle ages, so old and the residents, also old (it houses senior citizens), care for their gardens which abound with spring colour.. Tonight B & B in an 18th century pub. I am so hungry.

Day 31 Alcester to Rowington Green

The pub is well on the other side of town and far away from the Heart of England Way. Philip's map reading skills come to the fore and after walking through a large industrial estate (looking well out of place with our packs and sticks) we come to a field and a hill. We climb the hill and there at the top is a Heart of England Way marker. We are back. Well done Philip! As usual!

The green heart of England rolls out like a gentle love poem before us. Nothing unexpected awaiting, just more of the same lulling beauty. No hills, just the leisurely and unhurried rise and fall of the land.

Rapture awaits us in Alne Wood, its foliage a mist of fresh spring green and its floor a haze of purple blue bluebells. Here is another ode to nature, there are so many. No artist could do it justice, Spring is nature's gift to the world, it is fresh hope. Bannam Wood, a semi-natural broadleaved woodland at Warwickshire's highest point of 147m is also a delight - its trees a mixture of deciduous varieties such as ash, hazel, hawthorn, maple and sweet chestnut. The fully matured hawthorns are a mass of white blossom and the air is filled with their bright spritz of fragrance.

We sit on the hillside and make our lunch. The beauty around us brings great depth of emotion. A large black Labrador roars up the hill, gives a bark of braveness straight into our lunch as it passes, then bounds on salivating wetly. A woman in green wellies toils up the hill calling after her dog, nodding and apologising in rhythm with her stride. Philip and I gaze out over beautiful Warwickshire "You know" Philip says "this is the industrial heart of Britain but we can wander and look out and we see nothing but countryside. People would not believe this, they think England a cramped and crowded country. I think this is the best part of the walk so far". I agree "the size of the hills helps" I say. "oh, yes, this is truly living".

We belong to the moods of the land. The light and shadow under the shifting movement of the clouds as they catch and release the sun, the swooping of birds in the game of survival and the anger or joy of the day. So, together and separately, we walk across the great map of existence with all its intersecting lines, colours and sounds. Oh it is so astonishing to be part of it.

On to Henley in Arden, a small Warwickshire market town from medieval times, its long main street lined with Tudor buildings, where we buy supplies for the night. We walk on past the old Market Place and the remains of the 15th Century Market Cross, one of the few still existing in Warwickshire, to Beaudesert Mount. Philip knocks on the door of a house to ask for water and the lady kindly invites us in for a cup of tea and homemade shortbread. He charms them I think, they never ask me in. She warmly chats of her family and shows us photos. We wear no masks of pretension and carry our home on our backs. We are truly ourselves. Is this why there is a friendly face behind every door?

Munching sweets from our new provisions, we are soon climbing Beaudesert Mount. It isn't tall but it is very steep. In the distance we can see huge houses. It seems there is nowhere to hide ourselves so we knock on a farmhouse door and gain permission to camp in a field. Rosie's field at Lyons Farm in Rowington Green is our space for the night.

Rosie's son and his dog come running across the field. "Mum's got some friends coming for dinner and she says would you like to come too?" We are feeling grey and exhausted. Our bodies yearn for rest so we decline in favour of sleep. Not very sociable but we are also quite grubby.

Every day we have such a long way to go.

Day 32 Rowington Green to Kinwalsey

A 7.00am start this lovely crisp, clear lighted, blue skied morning. Everywhere the edges are sharp and vision far reaching. The gentle green bordered, soft underfoot path is easy walking and after leaving the farm takes us by Rowington Coppice. Ahead through the trees we have glimpses of Baldersley Clinton Church. Through a kissing gate the path leads us and past the church it runs clear and even between a soft wood and a classically English field. Sheep graze in the cool sunshine away from the lilac shade of the large oak trees. The symbol for the Heart of England Way is an oak tree and we have seen many of them along our way. We stop just past the church where someone has thoughtfully placed a park bench and there in the company of bluebells, sheep and twittering birds we make our coffee and chew on bread and cheese.

Further along we pass Baddersley Clinton Manor, a late medieval building which is impressive with its moat but it is too early for visitors and all is quiet. This is definitely another image for a picture postcard. There is a bridge across the moat and the creeper clad walls are of a lovely symmetry. We linger and are soon the point of interest for a number of hungry ducks. We pass Temple Balsall, given to an order of Knights known as the Knights Templar some time between 1135 and 1154. The Knights Templar were a crusading order founded in 1118 to protect pilgrims en route to the Holy Land and to nurse the sick.

Time for a rest and a drink. We relax at a table in the garden of the 'Olde Saracen Head Inn' sitting in the warm spring sunshine. Arrrh, this is delicious loitering. Some day walkers all decked out in shorts sit behind their frothy pints of dark beer at a table near us. A jolly fellow wearing a toothy grin notices our packs "where are you off to?" he calls. He is impressed and interested in our journey. He and his friends are walking through the countryside from pub to pub for the weekend. How delightful, I think. This would not be possible in Australia. The distances are vast and the land is beautiful but unfriendly in its climatic extremes and the creatures it conceals. There is also the issue of private land, in Australia we do not have public rights of way such as the British do. We turn back to our own drinks "the English are quick to take advantage of some sunshine" Philip chuckles eyeing their bare white legs.

Berkswell is our next stop. The Church of St. John the Baptist here is too good to miss.

In our book we read it is one of the finest examples of a Norman church in Warwickshire which dates from the 12th century and is likely to have been a place of worship for centuries before that. The half-timbered vestry built above the entrance porch is like a miniature house and we learn that it was originally the village school. How quaint. This is a church that has strong walls and secure doors but we are here to see the crypt which is the best preserved of any parish church in England. Our search for the crypt entrance is a long one. We walk around and around and around and then Philip finds it, a small wooden gate behind the last pew which leads down some damp stone steps to a door and a light switch. Philip flicks the switch and slowly opens the door. The Saxon stonework is softly orange in the light but all is cold and unwelcoming beneath the earth. A large christening font stands by the door. I can't imagine who would christen their baby here beneath the earth where the dead lie under cold stones. We do not stay long in this frigid and emotionless place.

We walk on and on - no shops for food, no B & B's. Finally, exhausted, we climb a stile and walk down the hill through farm fields almost to the motorway. We can hear the even hum of speeding traffic. It is too far to trek back up the hill to find the owner of this land. The field is huge. Probably the hedges have been removed to make the farmer's life easier. We drop our packs by a hedge and begin to scout the wide field for a place to hide ourselves. I look doubtfully at our packs "Will they be OK there" I warily ask. Philip's face rises in disbelief then crinkles into laughter. He looks about him in mock amazement. "This field is hardly milling with thieves" he says "come on, it's getting late". So, I have still not lost my city instincts, not even here where we are so alone beneath the sky.

We tuck ourselves in a far corner, in the shadow of the hedge and a large spreading tree and sit cross legged on our green ground sheet cooking some savoury rice and mushroom soup and wait to see whether anyone will come.

A light haze falls on the land and the evening draws to dusk, distances mist myopic but no-one comes, so we put the tent up and climb in. No sooner have we taken our shoes off when we hear the mooing of cows and the barking of a dog. I put my head out and see a farmer on the far side of the field herding his cows towards the farm motorway bridge. He

looks as though he is heading our way. "Philip, the farmer is coming". "If he comes over just tell him we thought this was the motorway services" Philip mumbles, then like a curtain drawing across a daylight window, sleep takes him. His nose begins to snore. I prepare to give him a solid kick as I look out again but the farmer's outline is disappearing in the dusk as he shepherds his cows over the bridge to the other half of his farm. Sighs of relief help warm the tent and I wriggle into my sleeping bag to sleep fitfully with the sound of the motorway and the creeping cold.

Day 33 Kinwalsey to Kingsbury Water Park

A 5.00am start and the world holds a supernatural stillness. Everyone is still asleep and you have only birds and rabbits for company. We cross high above the motorway from ridge to ridge by the farm bridge, once concrete but now growing a fine mat of green grass on the soil and dung deposited by plodding cows. When we reach Barrat's farm we are confronted by a most disgusting field of mud puddles mixed black-green with dung like an oily slick on the surface. Nothing for it, we just wade through and pass the barn where a wee caramel coloured calf coughs pitifully, his tongue popping out with each hollow hack. The weather is misty with a cold wind and low cloud. Earth and sky meet without touching. We are so cold. My fingers ache with it. Where is a glove shop?

The way takes us on past a crowd of old stone houses to Church End and then to Shustoke Reservoir. The reservoir sits high above us behind the trees to our left as we tramp a narrow track between it and a wire fence guarding the railway line. Tiny flowers dot the pathside and we meet no-one. I wonder where all the people are in this heavily populated heart of England. Probably at work!!!

The day plods on, uneventful until we reach Foul End. As we approach we debate the origins of the unusual name and we decide someone had once met a particularly grisly and foul end here. It transpires that it was once a rubbish dump. Ah well, some things are very simple. Philip knocks on the door of the 'oh so charming' Orchard Cottage to ask for water. George is in his garage and asks us in for coffee - what a delightful man, slight and bespectacled with a wide grin, and his wife Jill, quiet and welcoming. The time passes so quickly when you meet with friendship in such an open and pleasurable way. The coffee and biscuits are good but we settle into their company as though we have been friends for a lifetime. George has a keen interest in birds of prey, antique books and art. George and Jill love walking in the Lakes District. When we leave we realise we have spent hours talking. Well met friends, we will hopefully meet again.

We walk on into the afternoon of another of these precious days. Our destination is a campsite at the Kingsbury Water Park. Apparently this Water Park was a quarry but now is a recreation area of pools and lakes amid woodland, a refuge and breeding ground for abundant wildlife. Very civilised and well frequented by local families.

The day has turned pure spring and is perfect for camping.

Day 34
Kingsbury Water Park to Lichfield

Look above and be thankful, the sky is again blue and the sun shines on us as we sit in our corner of the caravan park and eat our breakfast of hot milky coffee and peanut butter rolls. (Yes, we eat a lot of peanut butter - thank goodness for peanut butter, tasty and lots of protein.) During the night we were awoken by a couple in the caravan opposite us. They were screaming and abusing each other but now all is quiet and we are the first up. Anger is such a waste of time, all that negative energy spilling out into the air tarnishing its purity.

Now it seems we are very efficient at packing up. Philip turns his head and says over his shoulder "we are a team". I smile. I am very happy with life at the moment, grateful for the liberty to explore the world. After checking the map it is an easy walk along well marked paths to the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal tow path with which we keep company for the first few miles of our day. The Bridges along this canal are named rather than numbered as is the normal practice. The Drayton Footbridge is a gothic structure and has spiral stairways in its supporting towers. It is such peaceful walking by the calm water, dark and glossy like polished obsidian, with its deep reflections of sky, tree and slowly moving clouds. The canal draws us northwards in a perfect line.

A short cut then into Drayton Bassat. Yes the sun, albeit a wintry lemon sun, is shining so we decide to christen our shorts. Living so much out in the world, no longer sheltered by the privacy of walls emboldens one. You almost feel invisible among strangers. So, we simply stop on the roadside by a hedge opposite houses and change into shorts. Are there prying eyes, we don't know and don't care. We move on and leave them behind. Feeling in a holiday mood because of our shorts we hasten now along lanes to a farm where we sit and boil up our water for tea and eat chocolate. The ritual of tea is an important one. It makes restful space in our day.

The journey to Lichfield is taking longer than we expect as we lose the path and wander about a wood. The compass once again shows us the direction and we follow a well trodden bridleway overhung with foliage until we pick up the way again. Lichfield is a city of spires. The Ladies of the Vale, the three tall spires of Lichfield Cathedral lead the traveller from afar. After so long in open country we enter the city of Lichfield, the first area of major civilisation since Bath and the last until Edinburgh. This city is small and is a surprise for us as we think of this as a major industrial area where the cities should smoke, rumble and fume. Indeed it is a charming and genteel place. As we approach the Cathedral we are delighted by the architecture. The Cathedral Close here is the most complete in England and the Cathedral dates from the twelfth century. It is Britain's smallest and took 150 years to complete. The style appears darkly Gothic, its soft sandstone darkened over time by the pollutants from the old Black Country industries north of Birmingham. I turn away from it to the handsome mansions that skirt the close. In the Cathedral Square everyone is busy tidying up after a Fair. We ask the

church verger whether he knows of any B & B's and he walks with us, his hairless bowling ball head shining and his black gown swinging with each long step, to a large and attractive house which faces the Cathedral entrance. Sitting outside on chairs watching the business of those all around is a dark haired, well fed woman. There is no B&B sign hanging above her door and we assume she is connected with the church. We are right.

Now we sit in a well furnished room in this delightful terrace house and from our window we look out onto the massive cathedral, frightening in its enormity and the dramatic and sometimes dark turn of its stonework. To me a place to put fear and awe into the community, not love and fellowship, for I see no welcome in its colossal structure. Tomorrow we leave the Heart of England Way and the Midlands for the Staffordshire Way and the North of England. Sleep tight, I wonder if the Cathedral bells will chime all night (I believe that there are 10 of them!!). Sleep is instant for my body grasps it hungrily.

Day 35 Lichfield to Cannock Chase

Today, before leaving Lichfield, we need to buy a book on the Staffordshire Way. After a good night in spite of the chiming of the bells - yes, they chimed every 15 minutes, we go in search of a such a book. I think it will be easy but it is not and takes much time before we find the book we want. The sequence is north to south but that doesn't matter we will just have to read it backwards, we are anxious to get on our way.

We head off from Lichfield and its frowning Gothic Cathedral and are very quickly in the countryside again. We walk on but both feel a bit discouraged and rather tired. Cannock Chase soon comes into view and after a looking at Castle Ring, the Iron Age Fort by the carpark, we enter the woods. Cannock Chase, originally part of Cannock Forest, now covers 26 miles and is an area of remarkable natural beauty. Here again is another landscape. The change is marked for gone are the soft pastoral fields of rural England and ahead is a wilder, untamed landscape.

The Way climbs to a plateau of heathland, a remnant of the ancient Cannock Forest where Henry II hunted. Fallow and red deer still roam the forest and we hope we will meet some. Red squirrels also still live in this area, one of the few populations left in southern England. The forest diminished during the 16th and 17th centuries as bark was needed to tan leather for shoemakers and charcoal required to fire furnaces. It is a sad reflection of the progression of mankind but of course man's time on earth is short and few of us think beyond our own lifespan. It is worth considering that three and a half million people live within 20 miles of this forest but we have not yet seen one of them in it. We breathe deeply of the cool fresh air and look about us. The huge forest spreads for miles over the hills. Light and shadow play with the colours and spaces between the trees and today we hope we remain gloriously alone.

We are still tired and so stop early at the Cannock Chase campsite. A small campsite of uneven green ground set amongst the trees, so we perch our tent on a small area of high ground in case it rains. The hour is not much past the time for afternoon tea but too tired to care we slide into our sleeping bags without even having a shower. No dinner as we stopped in a pub and ate a huge lunch. Rain begins to beat its regular music on the tent and it is set to rain all night. I love the sound of rain so close to my head when I am here all snug with Philip curled up in our sleeping bags. Good night or should I say "afternoon" world.

Day 36 Cannock Chase to Abbots Bromley

The speeding hot droplets of the shower feel good on my back and I am loath to move back into the cold air of the shower room. The thought of drying myself with my less than adequate camp chamois (it is not much bigger than a dish cloth) does nothing to encourage haste. Small pleasures are relished in the seconds they consume.

Philip is waiting when I return to the campsite as today will be another early start - the Glacial Boulder and the crossways of the Heart of England Way and the Staffordshire Way awaits our anxious feet.

The forest is light and airy in the early morning and windswept showers race down on us from the scudding clouds. Waterproofs on again. I hold back as long as I can before putting them on as they are hot and uncomfortable. Philip's problem with his rear end has not reappeared. His body has adapted I suppose.

The walking is splendid and the air so fresh and spiced with the scent of pine. Breakfast of sardine rolls (a welcome change from peanut butter) and milky coffee is on a pile of logs listening to the music of the birds and throaty warble of the frogs. We are starving and enjoy our break after treading sandy tracks through Scots Pines for some hours in the luminous light of this new day.

The Glacial Boulder is a big disappointment. I suppose I expected something huge and imposing but it is just a largish boulder mounted on concrete set amid a small grassy area. I am taller than it, I expected to look up at it with wonder. The Glacial Boulder came to Cannock Chase in the ice age from south west Scotland. That is a long journey for a rock. We stop for a photo then turn our backs on the Heart of England Way and follow the rustic Staffs Way sign into wilder country of hills and moors. The thwack of the wind in our faces slows progress but the rain has dissipated into the watery light. Derbyshire ahead.

Heathland of heather, bracken and wavy haired grasses roll away before us and forests loom darkly on the hilltops. Here is a drama we have not yet encountered and our pace quickens in excitement. Wild valleys by tumbling, dancing streams and large patches of woodland. We cross a railway line and pull up a steep hill through a deciduous woodland.

This is Kitbag Hill. At the top was a camp for young airmen preparing to fly to war. The plaque by the path tells us this.

I glance around aware of the rustling shadows of those now dead. Muddy footprints, cheerful jibing, fear and hope bringing loud laughter and muffled talk. Up this hill they trudged, the young airmen. For many of them it would be their last hill before meeting their fiery fate in the skies above Germany. I hope their spirits fly free. History is short as well as long and it is always edged with tragedy. And we would do well to remember that history is ahead of us as well as behind us.

We are sad to leave the quiet beauty of Cannock Chase and sadder still that we have not sighted any of the famous deer who make it their home. Ahead though awaits another treat, more easy walking along the tow path of the Trent and Mersey Canal. What beauty, a wonderful three miles of softness and light, gentle reflections on secret waters. The trees and foliage at the side of the canal are bursting with spring and squirrels play tag in the exciting game of mating. Warblers sit in the alder trees and we see a kingfisher and some moorhens. Away down the hill are gentle fields and woods carpeted with bluebells, daisies and brilliant golden dandelions. Breathe deeply of this joy, this new life and sing its song, for this is truly living. How can I ever go back to the towers of concrete and fields of asphalt?

Abbots Bromley is a village of fine houses where every year on a Monday in September at 8am the villagers don horns and perform the Horn Dance outside the vicarage. The deermen carry the horns on their shoulders and are accompanied by a Fool, a Hobby Horse, Maid Marian and a Bowman. Wouldn't mind seeing that, crazy people, what fun. The six sets of horns that are used in the dance have been carbon dated to around the time of the Norman conquest.

No accommodation available. In this part of the country they are apt to simply not feel like guests. So says the local shopkeeper. So we walk along lanes and ask a farmer for permission to camp. "Any field where there are no sheep and leave no mess" is his reply, before closing the door in our faces. We have walked 17 miles today and tiredness is complete. I am becoming accustomed to the load on my back but my body is slight and my pack is heavy. Sometimes now at night when we lie down we get terrible leg cramps and spasms in our legs and feet. The spasms give an involuntary jolt to your whole body and keep you from sleep until exhaustion wins and thankfully carries us to the void that exists somewhere between dusk and first light.



From left to right:
Philip by the rustic Staffs Way sign
Philip in a light mist in the South Pennines
Approaching Black Hill
Company for lunch in the Yorkshire Dales



Day 37
Abbots Bromley to Alton

Quietly and in a pensive mood we leave the small green field by a gate in the hedge and step straight onto a narrow lane. A long day ahead to reach Alton where hopefully there will be a warm bed and a deep hot bath. We climb the easy slopes of hills covered in gently moving fields of wheat and tall bright gold rape flowers. Our path is the narrow strip edge between crops and hedges. Hunger pangs call a halt and we sit by the golden rape flowers on a wooden stile and eat breakfast. We are both feeling very tired and the days of walking are beginning to take their toll. Philip jokes "my feet feel like mashed potato, if it wasn't for my boots they would be spread all over the ground" There are some days we feel as though we can take on the world and win and others when a bumble bee is too strong an adversary.

11.00am finds us at Utoexter where we have breakfast again. I think I am getting rather tired of bacon and eggs but I am just so hungry all the time. I must be eating three or four times my normal food intake and still I am losing weight. The walk out of Utoexter is lengthy and dreary as we are walking by a road before heading off into the countryside again. Our limbs soon loosen and our feet begin to eat up the miles. Seems to take an hour or two of walking each day before we limber up and relax into our stride.

Alton, the home of an enormous theme park, is an unexpected pleasure. No indication of the theme park, it must be hidden in the tree shrouded valleys beyond the town, and Alton is a hilltop village which has retained its character. This is a credit to planning.

The Wild Duck Inn, on the village edge, is a welcome sight and yes there is a quite enormous bath of a size that is no longer made. I fill it almost to the brim and pepper the steaming water with mineral salts from a container on its rim. The water turns soft green and my naked body relaxes and revives as I sink gratefully into its depths. It is true that I am beginning to enjoy the camping but I love the B & B's, each one is so different.

When our stomachs growl for dinner we walk through the forest, downhill on a tiny path to The Talbot Inn. It is a gracious place for the ravenous to dine and the food is truly excellent. This night has a velvet softness which is new to our journey and as we carefully make our way back up the hill through dark woods over slippery stones we hope our washing will be dry. It waits, draped over the big old radiators in our room. Such are the preoccupations of the mind on a walk like this. It is the small things, the basics. Our world is each other and what is on our backs. We have far more comfort though than the early pilgrims who probably walked some of the same routes.

Day 38
Alton to Cheddleton

Philip stands in front of the mirror crumpled and rosy from sleep. He leans forward and draws the heavy velvet curtains back from the window to reveal panes framing brilliant blue sky. It is a glorious day! Soft golden sunshine beams from azure skies dressing the newly burst blossoms and spring green leaves with honeyed light. You can almost smell the honey and hear the bees.

Washing is all dry. There will be no socks flapping from our packs today.

We leave the Wild Duck Inn and walk down the hill then follow the River Churnet to a soft under foot path which leads us to Dimmings Dale. Here we wander by tall trees of holly, rowan and birch in dappled sunshine through soft glades and shaded nooks. For some moments sadness mists our magic when we see that onto a tree down in Dimmings Dale someone has nailed a wreath for a young man who died in a war many years gone but in life loved to wander in these woods. "Gone, but not forgotten". The love must have been deep for fresh wreaths to be hung so long since the war. On these paths he walked, happy in the sunlight. I sigh. The shadows flit, I imagine his form against the backdrop of the woods, then the sun, rising over the hills, shafts long through the trees and he is gone.

Hours of walking through lovely woods along good clear tracks. Every now and then where the trees thin we glimpse the hills and farms beyond. We are quite high and have been climbing steadily for some time when we reach a forestry gate. A narrow lane beyond it winds steeply up and down the hill between the thickly forested slopes. Which way? up or down? We have strayed from our path too enchanted by our surroundings to pay heed to the map. So we walk up the lane and come to a cottage. The door is open and an old man sits at a wooden table. I call through the door asking for directions to Kingsley Holt. He gives them but they are unintelligible and very lengthy. Maybe he is senile or maybe he has always been like this, inbred, untouched by education and the world beyond his village. We smile at him and he smiles back. Confusion fogs our thoughts but luckily meet a sign which points up the hill clearly saying "Kingsley Holt". This is our direction.

At the top of the hill we come to a village of mixed architecture, old and new. A man is fixing a roof. Philip asks for water "Excuse me mate, would you be able to fill these for us" holding up our water bottles. "Hey up, no problem lad" he calls back in a strong northern accent "Would ee like cup of tar before goin'on". The tea comes with very large portions of cake. We chat with them for a while, general chat, the weather, our journey and things like that. I am very interested as they do not say "the" the whole time.

We pick up the trail again behind the undistinguished looking village chapel and descend from high hedged fields abruptly into the exceptionally narrow Churnet valley. Across Cherry Eye Bridge with its Gothic Arch (named for the inflamed eyes - caused by airborne industrial dust - of the workmen who years ago toiled here). We keep our eyes

open for water voles but none show their faces. This beautiful area of rolling hilly landscapes with steep wooded banks is Consall Nature Park with the emphasis on conservation. Consall Forge, once the site of a water powered ironworks brings interest to the great and peaceful beauty of water and woodland. Every turn is an oil painting the light and reflections playing in tune to create a small time warp of history. The Black Lion pub is closed but is so picturesque perched on higher ground beside where the river and the canal part and the railway line squeezes through. This must once have been a thriving area and the pub would have rumbled with rough voices and thirsty gulps. Ahead, before Oakmeadow Ford Lock, where the Caldon Canal joins the River Churnet for a short stretch, a stone bridge links the sides of the canal. Atop this we perch ourselves to eat our dinner whilst watching a deftly and brightly painted barge negotiate the lock. Philip is completely fascinated with the lock mechanisms and their origins. Woods of soft leafy trees overhang the canal and bright clusters of flowers stray from their edges. Birds dart and insects buzz. And the brightly painted barge drifts by.

Further along in the canalside pub at Cheddleton Philip has a glass of ale and we listen to the amicable banter of the pub patrons. There is so much laughter and joviality in the pubs we visit and the people seem to converse in a universal language reserved for the pub. Nothing deep and meaningful, just ribbing, whimsical or comical tales and lots of laughter. It seems woes are left at the door.

The campsite is only a few hundred yards walk and again the standard is very high. Our tent neighbour gets us some fish and chips when he goes to pick his wife up and another day over we once again slide into sleep.

Day 39 Alton to Rushton

After a stormy night of unsettled sleep we are back on the canal to Leek. It is a short, easy walk and we arrive to the bustle and business of Saturday morning shoppers. Our first objective is to find a cafe. There we meet another of the kind souls who helps guide our journey. We begin to chat to a man sitting at the next table. He is a local pub owner named Peter who keeps company with us through the streets of Leek and helps us find the guides and maps we need to begin the Pennine Way. The day is quickly disappearing so we bid our friend farewell and hurry to buy provisions. To find our way out of town, we follow a handwritten map (drawn by the girl in the bookshop) to a disused railway path which leads us past a beautiful lake, Rudyard Reservoir (inspired Rudyard Kipling's parents in their choice of name for their son) to Rushton.

The lake is really a reservoir constructed in 1831 to supply the Caldon Canal. But here is another type of scenery, more Australian than anything we have seen. Maybe it is the day that leads us to this conclusion for it is summer skies with soft sunlight surrounding the wooded shores. Legs dangling over the edge, we sit on the bank of the lake to eat our morning tea, eyes dazzled by the dancing reflections of the sunlight on the water. I have forgotten already that it is a weekend day, we lose track, and there are

quite a few people out enjoying the sunshine. A brightly painted miniature steam train chuffs up and down its tiny tracks along the shore of the lake. This makes me think about the reasons we began this trek. One of Philip's favourite quips of late had been "we've got to step out of the railway tracks". Our life was good but approaching (or reaching!) middle age brings its gremlins and one of them is the fear of never again doing anything exciting. And so began the pattern of thought that led us to this road, maybe the first of many. We all have a fear of coming to our end and saying "where did the years go". That is a terrifying thought.

"When shall completeness round time's incompleteness
Fulfilling joy, fulfilling pain?
Lo while we ask, life rolleth on in fleetness
To finished loss or finished gain"....CR

The warm sun burns into our backs and we begin to feel sleepy. It is a struggle to drag ourselves away from this warm corner out of the wind and soon we are back on the trail and then up through some fields. In the near distance is Rushton. The Fox Inn is a mile or two walk from the trail and we can see the beginning of the path snaking up a steep hill atop of which perches a lovely old church. A wooden railing aids us in the steep climb and then the walk to the Fox Inn seems interminable. As Tolkien said "the road goes ever onward, down from the door where it began....." and so we tread its weary way and hope our bed for the night is comfortable and the food is good. I can't wait to get this pack off my back.

Day 40 Rushton to Sutton

This is an amazing experience. We are sitting in a car, it is unbelievable to see the countryside whizzing by at such a rate. The Landlord of the Fox Inn is driving us back to Rushton to where we left our last footprints on yesterday's trail. No sooner has the car turned the corner leaving us on a track when Philip looks down at his chest. There the map case and compass normally hang, but.....nothing. "Where's the map case" Philip says with startled eyes. Well, there aren't many places to look. "Humph!" he says. I place my bottom on the grassy verge by the track next to our packs and Philip goes back to the road and puts his thumb out. I forage in the pack for food and prepare for a long wait. 15 minutes and he is back. He says a car stopped and picked him up almost immediately and then the driver, a youngish fellow with a friendly aspect, drove him to the Fox Inn and said he would wait and drive him back. Philip found the map and map case and was soon at my side. What a good deed which has saved us much frustration and time. The map case was in our room.

The Gritstone Trail was created by Cheshire County Council. It leaves Rushton and runs northwards for 19 miles following the westerly ridges of the Pennines to Lyme Park. These ridges are formed of angular sandstones or "grits". The rock was laid down under water, over 250 million years ago.

We find the Gritstone Trail by the canal behind a pub and set off on a wonderful journey. What glorious countryside. As we climb out of the verdant Dane valley into the green, slightly wilder hills with rushing rivers all around the surroundings have a wonderfully fresh feel. Birds and tiny animals everywhere but not a human to be seen. The walking is not easy, the hills have steep gradients and there is some mud too. Here the leaves of Spring have still not completely unfurled, it seems we are winning the race with Spring at the moment. We dally here and there in the rustic land, gently wild with green fields bitten short by rabbits and sheep. The occasional tumbling stones of a now ruined cottage add to the charm. Every where I look I see scenes worthy of an artist's brush. Would that I were one. These hills are the Minns and the panorama from their high level bare tops is magnificent over the flat plain of Cheshire with the Cloud and Mow Cop rising dark and mysterious at its fringe.

The lambing season is well under way and the baby lambs are so tiny. Fluffy cream with tiny black feet they loll in the sunshine or curl amid the roots of a tree, impervious to our passing.

No person have we met all day until after climbing a lane over the steep hills of Dark Peak we hear a roaring sound. We have only just finished changing into our shorts and admiring the magnificent vista when a red tractor roars around the corner and proceeds along the ridgeway. It is followed by a long procession of brightly coloured tractors of varying age and condition. Each tractor is piled high with happy folk and dogs. They wave and laugh as they pass. We wait until they have all gone before setting off again but when we reach the highest part of the ridge we can see them in the distance ahead, all angle parked in a long line like the tail of a bright kite fallen on the hilltop. Small clusters of people, like angular black ants dot the green grass.

When we meet with them they are a jolly lot. Tractors' day out. A bit of a spin over the hills and then, of course, down to the pub for a pint. They are very interested in our journey and delight in telling one of their number what we are doing. They call him over and openly relish his crestfallen expression when they compare our walk to his planned tractor ride from Liverpool to Whitby. Poor man, I wonder if he will still do it. It will be great fun.

We leave the Gritstone Trail for a campsite in Sutton. Another country village but rather strange residents. They are darting around the village carrying plastic bags of wet green cow dung and brandishing pieces of paper. It is a treasure hunt obviously organised by someone with a fiendish sense of humour. We chat with them on a stone bridge. They are all off to the pub "Come with us" they chorus "everyone will be there". We decline as again we are very tired. It is a shame really to have to say "no" but the walking is beginning to take its toll and although we wake refreshed each morning, by late afternoon a complete weariness overcomes us.

The campsite is a low farm field rising slightly away from a rushing stream and divided from the farm by a line of majestic trees. Under gathering clouds we begin to erect the

tent. The rain can not wait even five minutes. It laughs at us and bullet like it spits its wetness from a blasting wind. Damp and forlorn we race to get our tent up and then shove everything inside and quickly change into dry clothes. Into our sleeping bags we crawl trying to get warm. It is only 4pm - no dinner. Outside the strong winds buffet the tent and the rain lashes it. This English weather is capricious in the extreme. What an evening but too worn out to care about weather or dinner, we sleep.

Day 41 Sutton to Macclesfield Canal

Still raining when we wake. Oh, how dreary. Our early start fizzles in the rain drops. Feeling lacklustre because of the weather we pack our wet gear and go into the horse barn where the farmer says there is a kettle we can use to make coffee. Sheltered for a time from the elements and comfortable on chairs with backs we have two cups of coffee each and a couple of sardine rolls sitting at the horse girls' table. There is a good giggle to be had over their well worn book entitled "how to rate your lover by his star sign". Young girls dreams shared in a stable.

Clad in all our wet weather gear we slide off to join the trail. Wish I had stayed in bed - Tegg's Nose lies in wait. A teg is a young castrated ram and I look to the peak ahead and try and relate it to this. I think I have to imagine the ram on its back with its nose perpendicular to its face. Hmmm, not much luck in seeing the resemblance. We begin our ascent and it is such a steep and difficult climb made maddeningly slow by gale force winds that have tentacles of ice and whip around us, creeping in every crack, making every step a labour. We stop several times to take in the view. Out and away the plains of Cheshire spread, dams shimmer in the silver light and the green is velvety deep.

The path which climbs the sheer face of the hill to the top is very narrow. We are high now and the wind bellows up from the valley in great icy whooshes. A mighty gust catches me by surprise and lifts me clean off my feet, throwing me into the hillside. "Well that has never happened before". In truth it is a rather frightening thing and I instantly understand the fear and uncertainty of the elderly when they no longer have the strength to hold their feet to the ground. "That was amazing" Philip shouts over the windy roar "here you had better hold on to me until we reach the top". I look down the almost vertical slope and take his hand. When we reach the summit the wind is even stronger and Philip is able to lean at 45° and not fall over. He wants to try it closer to the edge. "Go ahead" I say "just your luck the wind will drop and so will you" He laughs.

The place itself however, is wonderful and the views are stunning into the Pennines, the Macclesfield Forest and the upper Bollin valley. It would have been a harsh and difficult job hewing the gritstone by hand up here in the bitter winter winds as they did many years ago. There is an element of danger which, for us, makes it exciting and again the total lack of people makes us feel very special. We are in the craggy heights and wisps of mist like tormented spirits fly in the wind. We fight to stay upright as we continue along the trail climbing green, high hills and trekking their tops. A heavier mist rolls in

and turns the scene diaphanous which compounds our difficulty. We cook lunch in a small thicket by a stone wall way up, alone but for the sheep on the lofty hilltops. Obviously from the amount of sheep dung we have to clear it is a popular place for shelter. Of course, being the general pattern of things, it begins to rain but we persevere. Hunger makes the food taste sensational. The day is freezing and my hands are again very swollen and difficult to use. We sit in the heavy drizzle hunched over our pasta and trying to keep the rain from diluting and cooling the sauce. Not much luck.

Stone walls march their divisive lines over the bleak hills and we trudge on following them and seeing no-one and nothing, our sight limited to a few metres and then a blank white wall of mist.

The most amazing thing is that, after fighting the gale force winds and freezing conditions all day, we descend from Sponds Hill into a valley of a completely different climate. A warm still afternoon with a herd of deer grazing peacefully amongst the russet grasses framed by a beautiful wood of softly green deciduous trees, fresh in their spring leaves. It is like entering a dream world. It is Lyme Country Park. Lyme Hall dates from the sixteenth century and is the largest house in Cheshire. The surrounding parkland covers nearly 1400 acres and rises away into moorland. There are excellent views of the Pennine Hills and the Cheshire Plain. In 1946 it was taken over by the National Trust. The parkland is occupied by herds of free-roaming deer in an idyllic natural setting only interrupted by a winding road up to the hall and the gardens of the hall are in the Dutch style. We greatly enjoy our 'stroll in the park' after such a difficult day and our spirits are lifted by the peace and beauty we find here.

A few miles of easy walking through the Country Park and level farmland brings us to the Macclesfield Canal and a campsite. A hot dinner and then bed. Exhausted, every day so worn out. I never knew I could feel so very very tired.

Day 42 Macclesfield Canal to Glossop

Golden sunshine, unsullied sparkling sapphire skies and a day of picking our way across the countryside by wooded and farmland footpaths, along river banks and canal towpaths to Glossop. We have to pick up some more maps from the Post Office and send off the ones we have finished with.

The canal towpath is a peaceful and undemanding way to walk after yesterday and the areas around it built up, indeed some places even industrial in a way that leads the imagination back to the Industrial Revolution. Philip is fascinated by the network of canals and locks near Brabyns Park and the Marple Aquaduct and people passing on barges call out to us and we have conversations that move on up the canalway before they are finished.

The Macclesfield Canal was constructed in 1831 under the instruction of Tomas Telford. In those days horses pulled brightly painted barges which carried lime, coal, salt and stone along the canal to other parts of England. There are many bridges and locks along the canal, these have an industrial revolution practicality and dignity about them. There are no locks between Marpel and Bosley as the canal follows the contour along the hills for 14 miles.

Nowadays the canal is used for relaxation and enjoyment, such as holiday barges, fishing and walking.

The beautiful River Goyt which runs from the Errwood and Fernilee reservoirs, north of Buxton, to Stockport where it joins the Tame to form the Mersey gives pleasurable walking in the warm sunshine and there is a feel of summer beneath the gentle rustle of leaves and the soft wash of the river. The scene lifts my face and heart - today is golden. The air is sweetened with the scent of trees, beech, oak, ash and sycamore and banks of flowers, bright and blooming fill sunny spaces. Bees buzz attracted by the bright colours and warm aromas. The scene is a safe one. Our grimace of yesterday is replaced with cheerful smiling faces. Yes it is pleasurable walking and apart from having to walk an extra mile or two through a forest because we miss a path, the day is agreeably uneventful. Finally the tar and cement of Glossop, a somewhat depressed looking town which lies below the moors of the Peak District, but is big enough to stock up on provisions in a superstore and find a cheap B & B for the night.

Day 43 Macclesfield to Crowden

Half day today! Hooray, a rest!! All the shops in these small towns and villages seem to have one afternoon a weekday off, so why shouldn't we!!

By the time we complete our chores - bank, provisions, etc. it is after 10.00am so we decide to use this glorious blue and gold day, the sky a cerulean painted roof of the world arcing from horizon to horizon, to rest and recuperate. Oh my, our feet have been so sore. So we cut across country to pick up the cycleway along which we walk straight and fast to Torside Reservoir where we at last meet the famous Pennine Way. Here is a challenge. The Pennine Way follows for 268 miles the rugged backbone of England, sometimes clearly but often indistinctly over the high bleak brown moors, deep dales and at times hazardous and windswept heights of the Pennine and Cheviot ranges. The way travels from the Peak District, through the Yorkshire Dales and along Hadrian's Wall and into Scotland. We have read it is only for very experienced walkers and we hope that by now we meet this criteria. So down to Crowden Campsite - very wide and green and so many rabbits live there - to wash and air everything in the light, warm wind.

We spend the afternoon leaning against the trees, barefooted and barelegged with hands resting gently in our laps, soaking up the sunshine in preparation for tomorrow - it will be an early start. The Pennine Way begins at Edale in Derbyshire and ends at Kirk Yetholm in Scotland. We join it here in Crowden some 2 days walk from Edale. The prospect of the Pennine Way, a real test of hardiness, is both exciting and frightening for we city folk.

Philip leans over on his elbow and says "are you worried?". "A little" I reply "it is just the unknown, the stories and myth people associate with this trail, I suppose, although we should be strong enough and experienced enough by now". Philip laughs "Our legs are strong as steel girders, we'll be fine". I look down at my legs. They really don't look a lot different.

Day 44 Crowden to Globe Farm

This day will live in my memory forever.

It starts excellently. Our feet fall well on the Pennine Way. Rugged and wild the hills lie ahead of us. As we climb steadily up the track by Crowden Brook to Oaken Clough the day grows warmer and even though the hour is early (7am) the weather is clear and promises warm sunshine, so we stop a mile or so in to change into our shorts. The walking is rough underfoot and we climb steeply in places. An early mist is lifting and reveals the wild bare hills of the South Pennines and the dramatic gritstone cliffs of Laddow Rocks.

Philip keeps reminding me that Black Hill lies ahead. We laugh about it not for a moment heeding the stories we have heard. This, after all, is England, not darkest Africa. No the path is clear, though narrow and we are not afraid, in fact we are enjoying ourselves immensely. Our bodies are now supple and strong and make easy work of the steep ascents and rough ground. The Way climbs over high hills and we follow it. Distance is wide and clear across the valley and through the valley runs a river, tumbling over black stones. It is exhilarating and exciting. We see no-one and the scenery is grand.

We stop to make coffee. Craggy gritstone stands proud of the towering rock hills and we ford numerous streams as they tumble their way down the hillside to meet the river below. And so we walk on. The scenery changes to black and bleak when we reach moorland. Black oozy peat pools, colourless tufty grasses and patches of depressingly lifeless looking black moss. Thankfully a long line of large stone slabs strides across the valley, making our passage easy and they end just up the hill beyond a stile in a barbed wire fence. The land we pass through breathes menace from its dark sodden earth and we hurry on to find greener scenes.

Now we reach Black Hill, the hill of such bad repute which rises 582 metres above sea level.

Surely this must be Tolkien's Mordor.

No more joyless, cheerless nor gloomily black landscape can be imagined. A great glutinous morass of black peat mire, seething and sogging muck. No foothold here for our weary feet. Out of the black wet mass rise black mounds which appear to be gently

smoking. Black moss and coarse grass grow sparsely in this ugly wasteland which stretches out over the hilltop as far as we can see. It's a monochrome world. Footprints are everywhere, there is no path and no sign and direction to take so we head for the trig point hoping to find our way from there. It no doubt must sit on firm ground. We have been distracted by the landscape, we should check the map. But we don't.

The footprints show others have made it and there is no turning back, so one foot in front of the other we go forward. So far so good, only a couple of yards to the Trig point, Philip ahead and me following slightly to his left. I take great care to stay close and imitate Philip's steps. Right foot forward, left to follow and with the next step down I go. Eyes downturn with horror. Suddenly everything is still and breath becomes ragged. Noise rises in my head and pounds as blood forced by adrenalin courses loudly through my veins. My body is a rigid post, unmoving in the peat that reaches my waist. I am half eaten by the hungry blackness. I scream, very loudly and feel detached from myself. Philip turns, and without the process of thought my left hand flies out to meet his. I dare not move for I realise if I wriggle, I sink. Visions of Sherlock Holmes movies flash through my mind. Philip heaves and tugs but the peat sucks at me, its grip like a vice. My shoulder stabs sharply with pain from Philip's frantic pulling. Eventually he drags me enough so that I am able to fall forward and slide out. I am blackened to match my surroundings. I struggle to stand up, the weight of my pack hampering my efforts.

Once on two feet again the shock sets in and I sob in great hiccups. The thought of walking further terrifies me, not for myself but how will I get Philip out if he sinks. Within an instant we are blanketed by a thick fog and the world turns from black to white as a winter's morn. There is no visibility of the Holme Moss transmitter mast just over a kilometre east of the summit that we hope to get a compass bearing on that will guide us from the hilltop. The scene is supernatural - the set of a horror movie and in our upset we wander and lose the trig point. We find a shale path and follow it to the edge of the hill which appears to drop away sharply its ends hidden in the mist. Back we go. The mist clears momentarily and the top of the mast appears. Philip takes a compass bearing and within ten minutes we are back at the trig point and once again find a shaly path. This again leads to the steep hillside, too steep for any path and it could easily hold cliffs hidden in the mist. Heavy cottony tufts of grass cling to its side. However there is nothing for it, I say I will not go back in the peat. I am beginning to shiver from my experience and the mist again covers us like a shroud. So down we go. I think we are mad. We may easily slip and break a leg, arm or back, it is a treacherous descent but luck stays our friend and we make it safely to the bottom. There we find a stream and a waterfall from which the next hill rises in an equally steep ascent. Philip takes a bearing on the waterfall and we head up, guided by our compass to once again find the path. Well done Philip. The path could easily have been missed as it runs along then up the hill - too far to the right and we would not have found it. We walk on a little wishing to make sure this is really it and then we take a break and Philip makes me a cup of tea to calm my nerves. How English! They really need a lot of calming. I am dry now but have a body coated in a fur of tiny brown fibres over a blackly brown stained skin. I will need a good scrubbing tonight.

From here the day can only get better and at Wessenden Head where we cross the A635 we find a tea and coffee van parked in a large gravelly area by the road. Here, along with steaming tea, cake and the company of travelling salesmen, we have news of Peter Pope who passed this way a week or so earlier. The way leads on to pass Essenden Reservoir and winds up and down to a slippery crossing over a weir at Blakeley Cough. How I love the names of the places we pass and the way the words are so unfamiliar and I have to roll them around my mouth, experimenting with the sounds. They are exciting words which fire the imagination and bring up the ghosts from the past. These ghosts are ever in our company and we find their footprints everywhere as we walk over history.

Later in the evening we reach Globe Farm, a listed campsite on the Pennine Way, and hear stories of fellows who sank to their necks on Black Hill and the peaty moors because they struggled. One lone German walker had to wait with only his head above the ground for hours until someone happened to pass by. It doesn't bear thinking about. Who would go there alone after rain? If ever I come here again I will walk a hundred extra miles to avoid Black Hill. Not for me the fame in a thousand years of being the Peat Bog woman found on Hill Noir.

My shoulder aches from my experience and I spend a long time in the campers' shower which gives minimal privacy in what can only be described as a storeroom beneath the farm, scrubbing the peat stains and fibres from my skin.

Day 45 Globe Farm to Colden

The walking today is high and easy. There are wonderful views across the valleys and White Hill, living up to its opposite name colour, is no threat. Peat bogs still abound but they ooze innocently by flagging stone paths. White Hill is covered in large boulders and when we reach Blackstone Edge Philip climbs the trig point which is perched on a rock close to the crag edge. The views are magnificent, wide and panoramic encompassing the greens and golds of patchwork fields and Hollingworth Lake shimmers in their midst. The landscape up here on the edge is rugged and rocky and a pleasant change from the peaty moorland of yesterday. We are high on the hills beneath an arc of perfect blue on a splendid golden day. Soon we meet the Aiggin Stone, a 7 foot long stone pillar located on the county boundary of Yorkshire with Lancashire at Blackstone Edge Moor above the Ryburn reservoir. The history is that it may have been a way marker situated near a cobbled pre packhorse route over Blackstone Edge that some consider is an old Roman road. 'Aiggin' is believed to have been derived from the French 'aiguille' (a needle) or 'aigle' (an eagle) but this I think is mostly conjecture. From here it is downhill to the White House Inn on the A58. It is rather a shock to meet these busy roads, as we walk out from what feels like wilderness and are dragged back into the reality of the world. We have a welcome cool drink at the pub sitting outdoors for the weather is Spring moving to summer. Blue skies, soft breezes and shorts and t-shirts in the sunshine. A man with a pushbike joins us at our table and laments his life. He is unemployed and alone. He

looks fit and well and as Philip and I walk away we think he has a lucky life out on his bike on a day like this.

The day draws on, its warmth increasing and the sun beats down upon us. Walking in the heat with a heavy pack soon begins to take its toll and we are constantly thirsty. Water is getting low as we tread the flat hard waterboard road by Blackstone Edge, Light Hazzles and Warland Reservoirs. Out over the heathered moorland, brown and harsh below us we gaze. Soon the view to the north is dominated by a large obelisk pointing darkly into the blue heavens. We consult our map and see that this is Studely Pike which was originally erected to commemorate victory over the French at Waterloo but came down in a storm during the 1850's. The current pike was built to replace it. Stone cairns mark the way along a rough track. The land seems so wide and free, untamed and prone no doubt to wild and unforgiving weather but beyond this hilltop the valleys lie broad and lush, the softer landscape of the Calder valley. Further in the distance stretches more rough moorland and here and there is the sprawl of urban living.

What a great and wonderful thing is this walk. On days such as this we wish it would stretch forever. Maybe we will just keep on walking on and on all around the world. Come walk with me to see what we can see, you don't need anybody else, you just need to be together you and me. Just one foot in front of the other, one day after the other and life becomes living. Who that has not experienced this could understand?

We are making good time but I am very weary. So is Philip. The days are long now and the light is still with us. We stop at another pub for a lovely meal and at about 9.30pm march up the road to the New Delight Inn, another listed campsite. What a shock, a real shock. Two fellows have already made camp there on the sloping paddock by the road, more a grass verge on a corner than a camping area. The grass is almost 2 feet high and glistening with dampness in the late evening. The facilities consist of a half fallen down shed with a door that won't close and a toilet rocking on its foundations. What a disgrace. It is late and I am at the point of total exhaustion so we have no choice but to stay. Begrudgingly Philip goes to the bar and pays our 5 pounds. We have a general gripe to our companions in the field and they to us for there is nowhere to wash away the heat and grime of the day. We are expected to go to the pub toilets and use the basins there amid the Friday night crowd of teenage girls. No thank you!

In the tent we sleep fitfully, sliding then waking and by morning the blood has left our heads. The young pub patrons screech their cars around the corner by our ears and laugh loudly at bad jokes in their drunken glee. Groan, what a night.

Day 46 Colden to Ickenshaw

This morning we are annoyed. We are ready to speak harshly to the landlord. No one around. So Philip puts pen to paper and writes a cryptic note. He includes a business plan. The place appears to be very poorly run and in a miserly fashion. There is a large German Shepherd dog penned in a small concrete verandah above the lower level of the

pub. It paces relentlessly and restlessly, occasionally letting out a passionate howl. It is cruel to keep any dog, let alone a large one in such a small and exposed place. The cleaning lady comes by and reads our letter. She is very enthusiastic and volunteers to leave it on the pool table. "This is what they need", she says and her tone and expression communicate all that is left unsaid in those few words.

Another long day ahead. The morning is pinkly hazy in expectation of another warm day. Long trousers I think. Today will not offer much shade and I don't wish my legs to be burned. We climb the walled path which travels from the lane up and out over the hilltop and into the vast open wilderness of Heptonstall Moor. Many of the paths we follow are rutted and fading tracks marked here and there by manheight narrow and weathered stones. These are old packhorse trails, once the trade routes over the mountains between Yorkshire and Lancashire. Here also on these high moors was born some of the inspiration of the Bronte Sisters. The spirit of the land is strong, its strength is its spirit.

The high ridges and open moors of Bronte country offer no protection from the sun. The vast brown heathered moors roll out over the hills in all directions, the forever moors seems an appropriate name. A lonely land, home to tiny creatures and birds hidden in the brown, but no human habitation. At Top Withins we see the house reputed to be the Earnshaw home in Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte but this is strongly disputed by the experts. Wild and barren, pleasant on a day like today, but how bleak, foreboding and unforgiving it must appear in the depths of a wild winter of swirling wet mists and icy winds. A hint of danger lurks in the loneliness, the land knows change comes quickly to trap the unwary and the wind shifts the brown in quiet mocking whispers. There has been death here, I can feel it.

The Yorkshire Dales National Park covers a unique area of limestone which features dramatic cliffs and gorges, the famous limestone pavements and a landscape of pastoral valleys patterned with dry-stone walls, barns and stone built villages. There are numerous attractive streams and waterfalls and, typical of limestone hills, the streams often vanish into labyrinths of caves, channels and shafts that honeycomb the rock. On the fells, millstone grit often overlies the limestone, giving a bleaker, heather-covered aspect to the Park. In late spring and autumn the fells are a blaze of colour with curlew, snipe, redshank and buzzards soaring overhead. The lush green meadows of the dales, with their wild flowers and the clear bright water of the quieter rivers, provides an inviting contrast to the drama of the fells. Nidderdale is the smallest of the Yorkshire Dales, between Grassington in the west and Ripon to the east; Harrogate is at its south-west corner and Middleham is the northerly point. Within this compact area there are 55 glorious miles of unspoilt paradise. Lying just outside the Yorkshire Dales National Park, Nidderdale is a peaceful place to visit, and the upper Dale is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

(http://www.walkingpages.co.uk/places/CP_yorkshire_intro.htm)

Then a change, down into the Dales, into the softly undulating hills of Lothersdale. Rural valleys of brilliant green netted with dry stone walls, old stone farmhouses and cottages crowding village streets. Evening brings us to the village of Ickenshaw where we camp in a field behind a house. Much better facilities, plenty of hot water to wash away the woes of a long day followed by dinner in the Black Bull Pub where the landlord is awarded our vote for the friendliest and jolliest of all. He is having a party for his daughter's wedding and invites us. The hospitality is amazing, so warm and so welcoming. Too tired though to party for too long so after a while we go back to our tent.

We have companions in the field again tonight. This time two Dutch men, one with a balding head scorched to a red beacon by today's sunshine. Philip fossicks in his rucksack. "There, I knew I had a spare hat" he says. He strides over to our neighbours. There is much nodding and smiling between the three shadowy stick men. Philip returns. "that will keep the sun off his head" he says. I find out that they are two Dutchmen, Dirk and Jan, who regularly walk England's ways together. They are brothers-in-law. I look over at them and see from their body language how comfortable is their relationship....."a pair of brothers brotherly, silent with long unbroken silences....". I think I like them, just by the way they are, the way they do what they do.

To sleep, too weary to dream.....we are growing thin, wearing to a mere frazzle.

Day 47 Ickenshaw to Gargave

Taste life, devour it, be part of the world. Today is glorious!! We are off to communicate with nature. Every day nature is our companion.

All day we keep seeing the Dutchmen - Dirk and Jan. Lots of people walking today as it is Sunday and the sun has the sheen of a golden orb rising in an azure haze. An easy day, only 13 1/2 miles after 3 days of 16 miles plus. We wander, arms swinging in carefree rhythm, voices high with happiness and faces beaming, through the valleys and over the hills of these beautiful Yorkshire Dales.

Lothersdale is a hidden treasure we approach over the jade hills by bubbling becks and soft-leaved deciduous trees. The town, hiding in the foliage of its trees and the lee of the hills can be spotted by its tall mill chimney which points like a dark finger to the sky. A picturesque village of age-worn stone houses and quiet ways, shadowed mauve and grey beneath the moving trees. We find our track up the hill out of the village and come again upon Dirk and Jan who are civilised like us and stop for proper coffee breaks bringing full enjoyment of the day. Dirk comments "these English walkers, they eat chocolate and drink lemonade as they walk but we Europeans enjoy the making of tea or coffee and sitting on a hillside". "us too, yes us too" Philip replies.

We leave the green and climb through heather moors to a trig point high on a hill from where we can see forever. Yorkshire and the Calder valley to one side and Lancashire to the other. Shaded by the trig point we make our coffee. We think ourselves alone when all of a sudden with a groan a body rolls out from the depths of the heather. We are startled by this unexpected appearance. He has been asleep, completely concealed beneath the heather and our voices have woken him. As if it is the most natural thing in the world, he turns over and sits up to join us and the conversation is quite entertaining. Such an Englishman, eccentric and a total individual (well now, not many people would sleep buried in the heather!). He often comes up into the hills to escape his family he says, but I think he is only joking. Probably wants to escape his home duties. So many "passing ships" and just a little peep for us through the window into the living room of their lives. It

is one of the great parts of this walk - although it is all splendid. I say again....what precious days of freedom and togetherness sharing all these joys and wonders.

The Dutchmen pass us again only to stop half way down the hill so Dirk can remove his boot and inspect his throbbing foot. Whoops, he is getting blisters - that will spoil his walking. We give Dirk a 'moleskin' for his foot. He has new boots and walking is tortuous. Moleskin has been our saviour and we have not had one blister between us in all these long miles.

We rest and eat deep in an emerald valley on the edge of a field and shaded by a beautiful spreading tree. The cows on the hill beyond follow their natural curiosity and meander down to the fence behind us, each pushing the other to get a better view. Soon the whole herd are competing for the best view, wonder and acceptance together in the dark pools of their eyes. Luckily the fence is between us and them so they cannot become too much a part of our break. We go on through the pastures green. "Is that a bull?" Philip asks as we pass through a herd of cows. I laugh. He asks almost every day.

Tonight we are camping in this beautiful village of Gargave set amid lush fields, flowering hawthorn bushes and trees bursting with blossom. By the village runs the River Aire shaded by softly moving leafy trees. This is all you could imagine England to be and the weather is perfect. We visit the local cafe and write of our journey in the visitors' book. Many tales are entered therein. There must be a very large community of walkers in this country. People dedicated to the care of the countryside and the premise of enjoyment for all.

Dirk and Jan camp beside us again tonight. We sit together in the long twilight and share stories of our travels and lives. After a time hunger pangs rouse us and we set off to find a fish and chip shop. Heaven's myriad of stars will soon begin to flicker in the clear skies above but by then sleep will have claimed us. Truly grand is this way of life.

Day 48 Gargave to Malham

"Widdershins turned I, singing it low
watching the wild birds come and go;
No cloud in the deep dark blue to be seen
under the thick-thatched branches green" .. Walter de la Mare

Surely it could not get better but unbelievably it has. I walk today in a haze of wonder and beauty. I want to hug the land, I can't express my feelings of love for its splendour. It sounds ridiculous but I am simply bursting with the joy of living.

We leave Gargave along a tiny lane lined with colourful spring flowers and verdant trees bursting with spring and then across high pastures of lush grass, contented cows

grazing, to find again the River Aire. From here is paradise. The day has warmed considerably but discomfort is of little consequence so absorbed are we by our surroundings. A cheerful shallow river bubbles along, its foam peaks rising and falling to catch the sun in silver shimmers like the folding of a fairy's wings. The smooth water washed stones are magnified and pearlised beneath the crystal water. All around is harmony and the wonderful feel of a lazy summer holiday. And the light, the light is wonderful, somehow thick with hazy golden rays. We have entered the Yorkshire Dales National Park and are greatly looking forward to the miles ahead. Beautiful sycamore and horse chestnut trees sway and groan gently in the soft breeze and their branches cast shadow across our path. "This really is so beautiful" Philip says, awe in his eyes.

A little further on we enter a field of cows. We reach the middle of the field when Philip nudges me and says "bull". I look to my right and am suddenly face to face with a huge white bull complete with bright brass ring through his nose. Philip managed to recognise this one. His black eyes hold nothing but mild curiosity and I walk on but the curious cows again plod in their slow deliberate way towards and behind us. They move in simultaneous wave to form a bumping crowd in the corner of the field where we attempt to avoid their noses and climb a stile. We wave to our cow fans and move on. How long they stand there, staring ahead, haunch to haunch, I have no idea.

We pass Dirk and Jan again. They are sitting amongst tree roots close to the river's edge, eating honey and biscuits and drinking tea. We walk on, entranced. Stone bridges lie lazily on their backs over the happy water and every step is beauty beyond what nature could be expected to give us. Laughter mixes well with light and splendour in a recipe for contentment as we step along the green.

We enter Malham by Wainwright's original route along the left bank of the river. We can't leave it for the hills now, too warm to climb, rather stay by the cool stones and shady trees.

A rocky beck runs through the centre of the village. Limestone and whitewashed cottages line the street, most offering Bed and Breakfast and there are several cafes and shops for hikers and climbers. Starving as we are, we head straight for the Buck Inn which has a bar for hikers and the food is very good. Relaxed and with full stomachs we walk to the northern end of the village and book into the camping site, a field of a National Trust farm. The field is green and even and sits in a relatively flat area below a steep high hill, equally green and webbed in a haphazard fashion with grey drystone walls. Scraggy, untidy trees grow here and there along their uneven line. The effect is stunning. How many centuries ago did the hardworking inhabitants toil to create these walls and clear the fields. Dirk and Jan are also here and we chat about our day. They love England and its hills, so different from the flat lands of Holland

Too hot to sit in the exposed field so we wander into the village to while away the afternoon by the beck eating icecream and dreaming of the days to come. Dinner is a repeat of lunch at the Buck Inn. We each eat another enormous three course meal. Delicious and we are getting so skinny. Eat, walk, sleep, smile...this is the pattern of our days.

Day 49

Malham to Horton in Ribblesdale

A long hard day ahead - 16 miles of climbing. 5am beneath a bright, clear dawn and we are on the path to Malham Cove - 2 miles north of Malham. This path must meet many feet for it is wide, white and well maintained. We think ourselves very lucky to be alone on it in the fair morning light. Today we feel strong and energetic. This is good.

A huge 280 feet high limestone cliff curves around the end of the valley like a great amphitheatre or blind valley where ancient man could have herded and trapped his prey with great success. This was once the scene of a spectacular waterfall which would have tumbled with full flying foaming force to the valley floor. The river now travels a hidden subterranean route through an undiscovered cave system. From the cliff base through a narrow slit it oozes as Malham Beck which, when it meets the daylight, foams and dances its way over its rock-bumpy bed under a clapper bridge of flat stone slabs supported on stone piers and on down into Malham.

Beside the cove rises a steep flight of seemingly endless stone steps to the top. We trudge up these stopping to admire the view and take deep breaths of the lovely morning air. I cannot express enough how astonishing is the world when viewed over the steady and gentle plod of one's feet. It is even better when ours are the only feet around. For me, growing up with mostly English literature, the world we pass is a tableau of the many stories I have read, full of change, light, colour and wonder. I'd like to send a message to anyone who has a jaded or tarnished view of life. Step out into the green land, walk slowly, breathe deeply and look about. It's free.

Up above the curve of the cliff we pick our way over the limestone pavement, an area of uneven water-shaped rocks and boulders, worn shiny and slippery and holding many gaps and holes to trap an ankle and snap it. The path is unclear but we climb down over the stones into Dry Valley (no longer carrying the river that fed the waterfall) and follow a high stone wall into its depths. The grass is littered with white limestone and the hillsides below the craggy cliffs hold great rock spills like wide, frozen waterfalls. At the end of the valley we climb steeply and walk the high fells to Malham Tarn, one of Yorkshire's few natural lakes. The Tarn is much larger than I expect and is flanked on the far side by a wood in which stands a lovely Victorian mansion, Malham Tarn House. Cows, looking very English, stand without moving in the sunshine hoof deep in the Tarn. They raise their heads as we pass, eyes showing mild interest and looking like a gaggle of fat ladies decked in black and white and paddling in a summer sea. Philip says with a twinkle "Is that a bull?" I doubt there would be many days like this up here. Warm, sunny and the sky so clear and blue. This scene invites a relaxing break so we leave the cows behind, knowing they will not give us the peace to make coffee, and walk on around to sit by the lake. The Nature Reserve is entered by a gate and is a field study centre. There and around the house are planted a profusion of "Please do not" signs. Our time is spent reading them as we pass.

The tarn is clear and twinkling with sun sparkles. We sit beneath a tree on a small bank and boil up some water in the trianga. "We must be close to half way by now" says Philip "I'm really proud of you, you know, you are doing so well". Actually I think I am doing really well too, but I just smile. All these miles day after day and I think now that all the twinges and stiffness have long ago been walked out. I have never been so fit. Astonishing! Of course, Philip is going well too but we all expect that of a man. Strange really.

The next part of the walk is still more climbing, high fell walking over tree barren hills still criss-crossed with white/grey stone walls. The grass is so green and the sky so blue and the ragged sheep stare with open curiosity as we pass. And still we climb, up and up. Dirk and Jan catch up with us as we sit in the shade of a scraggily and lonesome tree by a high stone wall gulping water. They climb the stone stile over the wall, leaving us to enjoy the peace of the land. There is little shade on these high hills.

Around mid day the area we walk is brown moorland which absorbs the heat of the day and beats it back at us. We are very hot. We squash ourselves thin for our break in the narrow shade of a high hilltop stone wall which runs in an uneven line out over these bleak brown moors. As time draws on the shade grows less and the heat continues to radiate from the dark earth. We hurry to finish our meal hoping for cooler weather on the other side of the hill. The weather changes are dramatic and people we chat to tell us that a week of summer is all we may get.

From the wall it is steeply downhill and Pen-y-ghent looms ahead. As we approach this 'real mountain' its imposing craggy face looks impossible to climb. I shriek "I can't go up there, not with a pack on my back". "You can" says Philip "because we are not going back and the view from the top will be great". Well I have to say that my heart is rather leaden for I am afraid of heights and the fear is exacerbated by the knowledge of the unstable pack on my back which could unbalance me and cause me to fall. Deep breath and exhale, pushing out fear with air. Now I have a smile on my face for I am resolved. Up I go, one foot and one hand in front of the other concentrating only on the few feet around me and looking neither up nor down. My legs must be so strong now as I manage the climb easily and have all my breath when I reach the top. Philip has a good head for heights. This is an achievement and the outlook at the top is an eagle's view far and wide over distant hills and valleys. Philip smiles at me "told you you could do it" he says. I poke my tongue out then smile right to my ears. The roar of a Tornado strike aircraft makes us look up. He flashes into our vision almost close enough to touch. He turns his plane in barrel roll and then speeds off to almost instantly become a black speck in the blue yonder. Planes always disappear into 'the blue yonder', it is their role in every sky.

So exciting, Philip is overjoyed. He says "fabulous" drawing the word out with a heavy accent. Dirk comes up just behind us, Jan doesn't like climbing or heights and has gone around the mountain. Hmmm, Philip didn't tell me I could do that. I should check the map occasionally. Dirk's long legs carry him quickly away and he calls over his shoulder that he will make us tea and it will be ready when we catch up to him. So, soon

we three are perched above the path on the tufty side of this mountain sipping hot honeyed tea beneath the sapphire sunny skies and looking out into the wonderful world below, rich and green, beautiful and content with its place in the world and history. Leastways it looks as though it is content.

Camping tonight in a field in Horton in Ribblesdale and a village shop to stock up on supplies. The shopkeeper is bored and slightly impatient with my indecision. Doesn't he know that his shop is like an Aladdin's cave to a hungry walker and the weight and sustenance of every product needs to be considered. Food is always on our mind, but it is very heavy to carry. Every day we are tired, but only in body for our spirits soar with the event of each new morning and the wonder that our feet are still supporting our legs.

Day 50 Horton in Ribblesdale to Hawes

The morning chorus of birdsong again wakes us as the first rays of the sun chase away the night turning the low lying mist a pearly pink. The field of campers is quiet as we leave, all are hushed in sleep.

The mist hazes the landscape and patches of blue are thin strips between the stretchy clouds. We leave Horton from behind the Crown Hotel where we ate Pheasant and Port Pie the night before. The walled track is like walking on a dry stony river bed, feet slipping and grip difficult to find on the smooth rounded stones. But then the way becomes green and soft underfoot and the walking easier. We pass many sink holes, lurking at the side of the path, deep and dangerous, dark mouths of the earth waiting to engulf the unwary. Philip finds them interesting and moves on the edges, peering into the void. Whilst we are having our tea break on the edge of a farm lane by a stone wall a father and son from last night's campsite stop to chat - walking topics. Walk talk and beer talk seem to be favourite topics of the men we meet on the trail. Suddenly, as Pennine Way walkers, we are all part of a select club and I like the affinity. Most of the males we have met seem more interested in how long it takes them to walk the distance than what they see along the way. They all want to be record breakers. Endurance not enjoyment. So far we have not met any women.

We reach Ling Gill. Here a raucous stream races at the bottom of a heavily wooded ravine. The way continues to cross an old stone packhorse bridge. This would have been an ideal place for a break but we continue on to climb the grassy rises to meet the Cam High Road at Cam End. I scuff my foot shifting earth and creating small dust puffs. The dust settles on the old Roman Road which once felt the feet of legionnaires as they journeyed from Chester to Carlisle. They would have raised much dust on a day such as this. What is our place in time? This is a question older than the road I walk on. "Come on" says Philip "we've far to go". Philip is the "targets" man and I am the "dreamer".

We walk on, still climbing, but gently now. Pen-y-ghent is still the imposing feature of the landscape, behind us now, partly engulfed in mist beyond the boring, brown high

open moors that surround us. The man walking with his teenage son catches up again and we sit together on the colourless grasses that grow on the side of the hill gazing out at the now mist engulfed Pen-y-ghent. He tells of his walking adventures and of the joy of a hot bath followed by a good meal after a long day's walking. His favourite bath was in a house on a hill where the bathroom was window floor to ceiling and he could soak his aching body in the steaming water and look out over the hills to the path he had followed. He seems to be a man who lives for this style of recreation, there are many of them and I can understand completely.

After noon the landscape improves and is more pastoral descending into GALE through flower spotted meadows and then along the road to Hawes. Rain begins to fall from heavy banks of grey cloud, no camping tonight, tonight we will have a little luxury in The Crown. We shop for treats, including some of the famous cheeses from the Wensleydale Creamery, and this town has an abundance of choice, and then indulge ourselves whilst watching TV from the comfort of the bed. It is good to catch up with a bit of world news and ring home. I really don't think I am a camper at heart.

Day 51 Hawes to Tan Hill

Hawes (the name, Hawes, means a 'pass between mountains') is one of England's highest market towns and, as the capital of Upper Wensleydale, it bustles with activity. The green Yorkshire Dales hills of Buttertubs and Fleet Moss can be seen from the town and it is lovely to look out over the rooftops and see the countryside green and glowing in the distance. We feel refreshed after our comfortable night. Philip leans out the pub window to check the weather. It is grey. "There's Dirk and Jan" he calls to me. We shoulder our packs and hurry out to catch them to say farewell. They are heading home today. Philip chats to them and I walk back to the post box where I meet Linden, another Pennine Way walker. He thinks I am alone and he is looking for company but we have things to do before we leave town. No doubt we will meet him again.

Beyond Haylands Bridge we enter some meadows. What a delight - "Please walk single file across meadows" reads the sign. The narrow track, only one foot width wide, is obvious on the ground and what joy as we cross the fields, over stone stile after stone stile and cross these beautiful protected herb-rich meadows flowering in profusion with cranesbill, bistort, pignut and buttercup, in the massed colours of white, pink, yellow. The lush long green grasses grow amongst the flowers serving to accent their colour and beauty. How special this would be to small girls, stepping lightly and bending to pick neat bouquets with tiny hands for those they love (if the flowers were not protected, that is). Hardrow, one of the smallest of the Upper Wensleydale villages, is a wee and enchanting village that is gone from vision before you can sigh too much at its loveliness, then up Bluebell Hill along a track marked by drystone walls to begin the long steady climb up Great Shunner Fell. Mile after mile we climb. As each convex hump fills our vision we hope it will be the last one but after each of these undulations another rises above it, then another and another, our way over the bare hills marked by cairns, piles of stones to guide walkers. There is disbelief when we finally reach the summit and the views are

astounding. The wind is wild and untamed on this mountain top and we stop by a curved stone shelter with a stone seat in its curve, to chat with other walkers who are sitting and eating lunch out of the strongly gusting blasts of cold north air. They are a happy group. It is a holiday weekend and they are out rambling, laughing, puffing and eating chocolate.

Then begins the long descent through the far ranging murky moors to Thwaite in beautiful Swaledale. The final couple of miles above Moor Close are a nightmare of walking down a steep walled cart track suffering from horrific erosion. Old rain swishes down deep gullies full of large sharp water washed stones and oozes of mud. Several times we lose our footing but luckily avoid a fall. Our walking sticks are very necessary here. We stop at a cafe in Thwaite and have a very civilised 'tea for two' at a table in the sunshine. What glorious countryside. Thwaite is away from the world, a sanctuary of rustic stone cottages huddled on the hillside in the narrow and secluded end of the valley beneath the rise of Great Shunner Fell. From Thwaite to Keld is a tricky walk over an extremely irregular and rocky path which in its circular route, clings uncomfortably to a steep rugged hillside. We leave what is now a woodland walk to cross the bridge over the River Swale and decide to bypass Keld, a small cluster of buildings in the lee of a green hill. We had planned to stop at Keld but decide to walk another 4 miles to Tan Hill to decrease the length of our walk tomorrow from 21 to 17 miles. Even though we are fit, 21 miles over rugged and steep terrain makes an unpleasant day. We prefer to pace ourselves and enjoy the walking.

From Keld the scenery changes completely into rough outpasture over Stonesdale and into Birk Dale. As we pull up the steep hill beyond the village we turn to look back at the lovely green for before us is a disheartening landscape of dull open moorland. An isolated farm breaks the stretch of nothing and then nothing becomes complete. We climb on and the moor is crisscrossed by irrigation channels and becks. In places it is boggy underfoot and we make many circular detours to avoid the sinking squash of earth and water. The path leads up over the desolate hills and here and there we see mines flying a red flag and fenced by tumbled and inadequate posts and wire. I wonder at the depth of the shafts and who made them. I wonder also whether anyone has ever fallen in. This is Stonesdale Moor and we follow the old packhorse trail keeping well clear of the menace of unfenced coal pits.

We are again very tired, it has been a sometimes difficult day but now the end is in sight. Way in the distance, amid the desolate moor and in the fading light we spy the small dark form of Tan Hill Inn. At 1732 feet above sea level, it is the highest Inn in Great Britain. It is tiny in the distance but gives us the impetus we need to hasten our steps and end the day. What a welcome sight in this dismal and barren wasteland. In the 18th century it was the hub of several packhorse trails and the sight of the pub would have been equally welcome to those who traversed those tracks and hauled their goods along them.

The camping fee for a space at the back of the pub is one pound and so after a fried meal and a pint of good Yorkshire ale, we venture out into the frosty fading light and clear the dung balls from the sheep cropped grassy hilltop. Within minutes we have raised the tent.

From this bird's eye view there is nothing of interest to be seen in any direction, nothing that is except brown flat moorland, yes, more moorland, massive expanses of it and not a tree or building. A brown nothing place is Tan Hill. What a relief to lie down and rest our fatigued bodies. Sleep is instant, it falls on us like a black and welcome softness.

Day 52 Tan Hill to Middleton in Teesdale

Dreary, drawn out and depressing is to be the pattern for this day. Breakfast is sparse. It is a beautiful windless morning, the sky a soft pale blue and the clouds on the horizon a muted pink. The air is crisp, clear and the panorama wide and expansive given a different hue in the morning light.

Sleightholme Moor lies before us, a tawny dreary and brown expanse beneath the cool blue sky, nothing to lighten the view or lead the eye away from its emptiness. The path is sketchy and the ground thick and wet, dragging and holding the feet. Slowly we pick our way across, trying to avoid the worst of the bog, fearful of losing the path. This must be a nightmare in a heavy mist and we are thankful for a clear dry day. Once or twice we stray but soon find Frumming Beck which at least negates the possibility of becoming lost. Joyless, dreary, slow and monotonous walking. More a plod than a walk. A brief respite when we reach God's Bridge and cross an A road but then another moor, Cotherston Moor which blends perfectly into Mickleton Moor - more despair and desolation. We both feel very footsore and depressed brought down by the sombre mood of the place we walk and the difficulty of walking through rather than on it. We see not a soul, no-one to share a gripe with about the dismal terrain.

The making of some soup and a brief rest does little to help and to make matters worse our water is getting low. We take a detour by a high dam in the hope of getting water but the extra distance is wasted as the facilities are chained and bolted. Disheartened we go on, smiles returning as we climb lovely meadowland, green and fresh until we reach the ridge and look out over Middleton in Teesdale which lies in serene beauty beneath the protection of the green hills on the edge of the racing River Tees. As we begin to descend we pass a massive tumulus topped by a small forest - Kiracarrion. It rises like an odd man out, a large unnatural hillock and on another day its reputation for being haunted would have tempted us to investigate but today we are so so tired.

Philip winces, saying "Gees, I have a hot spot on my foot, can you believe that after all these hundreds of miles??" So we stop to put some moleskin on it. Our very first 'hot spot'. As we hold our steps firmly down the increasingly steep hillside we decide that we will stop at the first option - be it B & B or camping. Once we reach a haven of any sort we will stop, we are so so worn and weary. 52 days of walking and it is taking its toll. The campsite clings to the hem of the hill and is a large one with its own pub (an old railway station) and good facilities. We eat a late lunch and then sleep, too tired to care about the early hour and oblivious to the noise and movement of the happy Whitsun Holiday makers who, as the day wears out, are cramming into the campsite.

Day 53
Middleton in Teesdale to Forest in Teesdale

First thing this morning I walk to the red phone box and book ahead for accommodation in Forest in Teesdale.

After packing the tent we walk into the village. The village rises in terraces above the River Tees and winding stone walls follow the road over the bridge and up into the town of stone and whitewashed cottages and buildings. The town sits well in its past and though probably much visited has not yet succumbed to touristy shops and restaurants. We shop for provisions. The variety in the General Store is limited and expensive but I feel comfortable poking amongst the crammed shelves. Super stores with their vast choice of pre-packaged goods are practical but shops like this are on the edge of disappearance and touch the nostalgic in us.

At midday we set off to walk an easy ten miles to Forest in Teesdale. A beautiful day, a beautiful visage, the whole valley following the style of the village, remains locked in time. The dale belongs to Lord Barnard and most properties are tenanted. He won't allow the building of any more houses and all those he owns are whitewashed. And so the modern days are locked out and for us it is wonderful. There's that nostalgia again!

We tread soft paths by the River Tees. Yesterday's slog dims in the mind as we are absorbed into astonishing beauty. Flower filled verdant meadows, stone walls, white washed farmhouses and the wide swift river tumbling and surging its way along a stony bed. The river's peat seeped waters, like black tea, give accent to the white boiling bubbles that appear and disappear as it bumps and swirls over shiny rocks. Old bridges with columns of stone, rising high above the waters, cross the river and water booms and plunges over falls. Riverside flowers flutter in small puffs of wind and dark woodlands carpeted with bluebells rise up and away over the gentle hillsides. There are leafy, airy wooded glens and winding paths meandering close to and away from the river. We are at peace, no need for talk, there is enough in the airs that surround us to occupy all of our minds.

Up river we come to Low Force, small sister in power to High Force, its surging waters, diving and sliding over rocky platforms. We climb up above the river and ahead the air is palled with mist and full of noise. Philip goes first, pushing through the scrub to the edge of a dark cliff and our eyes meet the spectacular drama of High Force, a wild waterfall falling over the black cliffs like a million tattered, flying white ribbons above a boiling, hissing cauldron. The waters bubble in chaos and turmoil in the river below hurtling forward between rock-ribbed high craggy sides which drop below the rising thickly wooded hills.

Away from the popularly visited falls the world appears remote once more. High bracken and scrub covered mountains of shadow grow out of the wild flat land that lies beside the

river. The river is now wide and shallow with many sharp rocks protruding from its surface. These rocks interrupt the flow of the water causing it to rise and bubble catching the light and casting tiny shadows gone almost in the same instant they were created. Soon we are climbing again. Rough grey stones contrast with the green and russet hills and we stop in the shelter of some low cliffs to boil up our tea.

We passed many day walkers further back down the river but since leaving High Force we have met no-one. I unwrap two large pastries purchased this morning in the town. A man rounds the corner and comes into view. It is Linden. He has been behind us since Hawes but now we meet again. He too is headed for Forest in Teesdale. So we talk and we are familiar and friendly though we know him not. We are walkers, we are a common clan. We have affinity and I like it, I like it very much. Imagine for a moment being this familiar with a stranger in the city. There would be suspicion, not friendship. He does not dally for tea but wants to keep his pace and reach his destination.

We wend downhill and cross a bridge leaving the Pennine Way to walk into Forest in Teesdale where, beyond a fork in the road and a lone phone box, a whitewashed stone house stands high on a hill and a warm welcome awaits us, along with a big pot of steaming hot tea and a plate of homemade cake and biscuits. This is northern hospitality and it is good. The elementary pleasures of life are paramount. All the props and possessions have been swept away and life is raw. It is us on the path with the most basic essentials. Every kindness shown us is a wonderful blessing. Food is a joy, a ray of warm sunshine and a patch of blue sky lift the spirits immeasurably. All the small things are the great things. I hope it will ever be so.

Our hosts go off to a party and leave us sitting in front of a warm coal fire writing postcards. Outside the weather has turned. The wind howls and the rain falls. A wild and wonderful place this is. I am so glad we are not in the tent.

Day 54 Forest in Teesdale to Dufton

The day is grey but dry. Back on the road to the phone box from where a lane winds amongst fields of grass heavily speckled with bright yellow dandelions and back down to the river. A sign on the lane warns that "anyone exceeding 5mph will be stoned to death - and that means you".

Linden comes out of the youth hostel across the road and walks with us for a couple of hours. His company is welcome. He walks often leaving his family behind. Time to reflect and slow the pace of his life.

The way again follows the river and the path is difficult and uncomfortable to walk on - strewn with large rocks and boulders. For many miles we watch our feet and pick our way carefully. Broken ankle injuries would be common here. It is difficult to enjoy the splendid scenery when your eyes are constantly cast downward, protecting your feet.

Tea by the river and a chance to look around. Large treeless hills swell out of the land beside the river, tan hills, wild and uninhabited. Linden leaves us here saying that the first view of Cauldron Snout is best shared with someone close for it is an experience of awesome proportions. I like him.

Oh wonder and astonishment. A deafening crash of water bursting over the hill in a hellish torrent which widens as it lengthens between the rough black dolerite scramble at its sides. This is a wonderful moment, this is Cauldron Snout. Here the River Tees rushes in a series of cataracts over a 200 yard long rocky stairway, the vertical distance of which is 200 feet. Cauldron Snout is reputed to be haunted by a ghost. What a cold and watery place to tether a spirit. The ghost is called the 'Singing Lady'. She is a young Victorian farm girl who drowned herself in the waterfall when her love affair with a local lead miner finished. She has been seen singing a lament as she languishes on a rock near the falls on cold moonlit nights. We sit for a while to absorb the power and the sadness and then climb the steep rocky fall. It is difficult to concentrate where my hands and feet are taking me as I wish to gaze at the flying water at my side. At the top we look back to see the river snaking its way back down the valley in the shadow of the dark hulking craggy scarp of Falcon Clints.

We chance upon four men in an untidy muddle of legs, arms and back packs supine in the sun sipping from hip flasks. Their demeanour is rowdy. They jibe and joke as we pass. "This beats working" they call to us. We discover they are four ex marines now Bank Managers walking the Pennine Way together in a sort of reunion. We name them 'the Banker Boys'. Alcohol in the sun on a walk like this? That breaks all the rules of common sense I think but looking at them they are a wild lot and it probably fits. We can't help laughing though and sharing some of their spirit of fun.

Away then from water and into wilderness. We are feeling tired again today. Our weary feet are dragging. Seems a regular occurrence. We have good spirits though. Up and down across a wooden bridge and then up over some old tin mine heaps and into more bleak moorland. Red flags flutter here and there on the high moorland warning of open mine shafts and danger. The ragged path wears on and finds its way eventually to Maize Beck which needs to be forded. Fortunately the weather has been fairly dry and it is not in spate. We stand on the edge looking at the innocently bubbling beck and try to imagine the dramas that have unfolded here. Rescue helicopters and walkers swept away. On a day such as this it is difficult to visualise but we know that nature is our enemy as well as our friend. A few steps and we are across. "No problems there" comments Philip.

Then from the other side, up over the yellow and green high hills to one of the highlights of the Pennine Way. High Cup Nick. Brilliant. We top the hill and there before us in a great circular sweep the ground falls away to a u-shaped valley and grey-blue dolerite crags. In strange lines craggy blue grey columns stand pointing out from the valley sides as if in some ancient ritual. In the depths of the famous nick through the best glaciated valley in Northern England runs a tiny ribbon of silver threading its way out of the shadows to the wide flat lands of the Eden valley. This is High Cup Gill, a

fittingly poetical name for a water course in such a splendid setting. Pale grey stone walls run up the almost vertical sides of the valley. "How did they get those stones up there?" Philip says "There is no way you could stand upright on that slope". We take time to sit and look. Away on the further edge, others are doing the same. Perhaps they came up from Dufton in the valley. In the murky distance we can barely discern the mountains of the Lakeland Fells.

The walk from here to Dufton is long and tedious, not only because we are so tired, but the trail is jagged and uneven and the wind strong. Finally we meet the walled cart track which takes us into the village and the farm field campsite and we are just so exhausted. We have decided to have a 'lay day' tomorrow to try and regain some strength. We feel at this moment that we cannot go on.

The Stag Inn is packed with Whitsun Holiday makers but we sit with Linden and 'the Banker Boys' who we had seen along the way today. Philip jibes and laughs with the 'Boys' whose appetite for liquor seems insatiable and I wonder whether they will make it to Kirk Yetholm. Of course they will, simply propelled by alcoholic gusts of laughter and joviality. I talk long and quietly with Linden. The night is rowdy full of laughter and fun but when we walk back to our tent in the soft twilight and crawl into our sleeping bags we are relieved and thankful to be horizontal at last.

Day 55 Dufton

Rest. Blessed rest.

Our weary bones are laid flat all day today. We don't move from our tent except for a couple of visits to Dufton's tiny village store, a shower and dinner at The Stag Inn.

Stabbing foot pain, involuntary muscle spasms and cramps and a weariness so complete as to engulf our whole being.

Got to rest those feet, there is still a long way to go.

Our dinner at the Stag Inn is quite an experience. The previous night we had no trouble with service. Tonight the pub is equally busy but more with locals than yesterday's day trippers. We talk quietly for a time over our drinks and then Philip collects a couple of menus, signalling in a friendly fashion to the waitress that at some stage we will want to eat. People around us are served their meals or have their orders taken. We, however, appear to wear a cloak of invisibility. It is no good trying to catch someone's eye and even the raising and waving of the hand achieves nothing. We are so hungry. Philip walks over and tells a woman that we would like to order. She lowers her eyes and shuffles off, ignoring him. He comes back perplexed. More people arrive and are soon served a steaming hot meal. The evening moves on and still we have not given our order. Philip tries again, this time with the barmaid. She glances furtively around the pub and says

that she cannot take our order. It seems the Landlord has tonight developed an aversion to outsiders. Philip is starting to become annoyed, nearly two hours have passed. He sights the Landlord and approaches him. He promises some action. Another 15 minutes pass and then the Landlord himself flounces over to our table, lifts his arms and flops into a chair banging both palms on the table as he does so. "So you want dinner?" he says. We quickly give our basic order of fish, chips and salad. He carefully, slowly and with mock deliberation, writes the order on his pad and at the top in large bold capitals he writes, speaking the words as he does, "URGENT ORDER". With a surly glance he rises saying "this is not McDonalds you know!!" and leaves us to wait for our meal. GRRRRR! What an awful man.

Day 56 Dufton to Alston

5am and the alarm goes off. We rise immediately and peer out into the misty morning light. All around is quiet. I raise my eyes towards today's goal, Great Dun Fell and Cross Fell, the two highest points on the Pennine Way. The mountain tops are deep in a heavy mist of dark clouds and I shiver in anticipation of a cold grim day ahead. There will be no fine views this day.

We make our preparations in relative silence. We know today will be difficult, a real struggle, perhaps the most difficult day we have encountered, and we are still tired and footsore. Philip is slightly moody and his "good morning" disappears in the cool draft of the turn of his shoulder. I sigh. When he wakes up he will be OK.

Dufton, such an ordered village with its neat horse chestnut dotted village green and equally trim colour washed and stone houses lining the square. These trees with their dark foliage would cast deep shade on a warm sunny day, children would run and play happily and the residents would chat and gossip. There would be few secrets in this place. Philip says he can see young men passing from the doors, smartly turned out in their uniforms and off to fight The Great War. How many returned? It definitely has the feel of early in the twentieth century. But for now, all is quiet. A few chimneys smoke gently in the morning mist and a cat meows and leaps lightly from a tumbling stone wall, intent on breakfast and a place before one of those warm fires out of the now rising wind.

We leave Dufton along a small path to the side of *Dufton Hall* and begin our walk through the fields of the Eden valley to the feet of the mountains. The path is welcoming with stone walls, green fields and fine-looking broadleaved trees, these not swaying gently but pulled and tugged by a fierce wind. It is cold too and already my hands are swelling and becoming difficult to move. We cross Great Rundale Beck by a stone clapper bridge and then step lightly on a long green road and follow it to the edge of the brown stony moorland beneath Brownber Hill. I love these names, often so apt, so simple and yet so original. After crossing Swindale Beck we continue climbing and as we climb the wind grows stronger and takes a more bitter edge. The mist hides our goal and

distances are confused. The climbing is arduous and the wind ever in our faces, making speech a labour through frozen lips. We plod on each silently contemplating. I have to admit I am a little afraid. Fear of becoming lost on these high lonely mountains of harsh and unforgiving terrain and climate is niggling my mind but I shake my head and concentrate on my feet and try to keep my hands warm.

It seems an age before we reach the ridge of Knock Fell. On the flat grassy summit stands Knock Old Man a squat square cairn with a point on top looking like a stone monument sat on too often by a giant. The grass is covered in stones and there are many cairns, however we know our direction as the mist has cleared a little and we can now clearly see the white ball dome and mast of the radar and weather station atop Great Dun Fell. Away and beyond the distances are blurred. It looks as though it is raining in the Lakeland Fells. I look about me, again we are alone.

From Great Dunn Fell down and up to Little Dunn Fell the walking is easy on firm turf always looking ahead to the massive lump of Cross Fell. My heart sinks as the clouds come down on our heads and are soon whipping around our feet in the icy wind. Hard pellets of ice begin to lash us. Oh it is so so cold. Winter has strayed from the North Pole to heckle and harangue us. I shiver as we pass some peat hags. We negotiate the treacherous rocky scree and boulders and are finally atop Cross Fell. I feel that we should linger here on the highest point of the Pennine Way but the mood of the land is malevolent. Here is a windswept wilderness, a place so lonely as can only be friend to evil spirits. There are stone cairns everywhere and the mist and indistinct paths lead to confusion. Philip consults the compass and points our direction but the way down is marshy in the extreme and we are unsure. Finally we meet a track, the Corpse Road, along which Garrigal's dead were once carted, and turn left. After a few hundred yards Philip checks the compass and we realise we have turned wrongly and about face to head down the hill along a stony track towards the bare undulations of the mountains beyond. It is so remote up here. Way in the now clearing distance we can make out a cluster of buildings. It has taken us hours to get this far, it has been too cold to stop for refreshment and we are so hungry. The wind is still a wintry blast. We walk a way and in to our vision comes Greg's Hut, a small stone cottage 600 feet below the summit and standing in total isolation down the hillside by the path. Here, in this former miners' hut, the Mountain Bothies Association offer shelter and basic accommodation to walkers. "I wonder whether there is a message from Peter Pope" says Philip.

The heavy rough wooden door closes behind us and protected now from the howling winds, we are in a quiet, hollow space. Old smells from cooking and socks pervade the rooms. Above the blackened stone fireplace hangs a portrait of "Greg" after whom the hut was named. It is cold in here but feels far warmer than outside. I don't know where all the Pennine Way walkers are but we mostly find ourselves alone on the trail. We sigh and I look at my hands which are turning purple and extremely swollen. Philip checks the visitors' book and sees that Peter Pope has been here two weeks before us and he too was weary to the point of exhaustion. He has left us a message - "To the New Zealand couple I met at Lands End" Well I suppose Australia and New Zealand are close.

A cup of hot coffee and sandwiches does much to restore our spirits as does a sit down. We must press on. Alston is still a long way away. "It will definitely be B & B tonight." I say rubbing life back into my frozen hands. "You bet darling" Philip replies. So it is off along the way again past shafts, spoil heaps and disused lead mines. The ground is littered with purple pieces of fluorspar. Would be sparkly in the sunshine. It is a long tiresome haul down into Garrigal and we feel we will never get there. Each ridge we gain leads to hope of a view of the village but each time our hopes are dashed as beyond is more of the same brown moorland.

A lovely change of surroundings is Garrigal, gently paced, rustic, and with a general store for the purchase of some chocolates but it appears not to be really part of this century. The walk along the River South Tyne to Alston is just what we need. It is wonderful to be back amongst the green and to walk again in a cornucopia of nature's wonderland. The rabbits love being here too, they are everywhere in a darting abundance. The high hills hold drama and adventure and probably at the end it is they that we will remember more than the softer landscapes.

Alston, the highest market settlement in England, is up in the North Pennines in the district of Cumbria. Sitting in the middle of a broad, heather clad Pennine landscape by the River South Tyne, it is remote, about 20 miles from the nearest town. The main street is steep and cobbled and the houses and shops that crowd at its edges are of old stone. We pass through the afternoon bustle barely glancing at the distinctive market cross in our search for accommodation. So now we sit in our delightful attic room with a view over the rooftops of Alston which so resembles a view in a picture book of Heidi I had as a child. Fish and chips tonight, too weary to go in search of food and yes, my deep hot bath awaits me.

Day 57 Alston to Greenhead

My eyes open to a soft grey light. Outside the heavens are once again weeping a steady rain. I wriggle and close my eyes again not wanting to start the day. Groan, it will be wet weather gear. Philip nudges me "How about a cup of tea?" he asks. To lighten my mood I rise and dress by the tiny garret window with its storybook view of the olden rooftops and spire, a homely cup of tea in a bright cup in my hand.

Today we will walk to Greenhead but first out into the damp morning to do some chores. We carry a large parcel of surplus clothes and maps to send off from the post office, visit the bank and buy provisions. I think we are eating too much chocolate but with the cold weather and extreme exercise we seem to need the sugar and the fat to quell our hunger.

The rain falls in fine soft drops with no spaces between the wet lines of its drips. Fine rain, but drenching. The day is leaden. Green fields distinct amid stone walls and the stony bedded River South Tyne edged with flowered river meadows and elegant trees are the scenes we pass through. The way is sometimes slippery with mud. But this is so

much better than the high featureless moors and bare mountains of yesterday. No hint of danger here, just a gentle passing. Everywhere in the damp is a beautiful scent, light and delicious, awakening to the senses. It is the Hawthorn flowers I think, they fill the view in all directions. This scent has been with us much of our journey, I am supposing it is the Hawthorn flowers which seem to perfume the air when it rains.

The sun comes out and we walk on. We sit on a stone stile in a wall for morning tea. Greenish mustard brown cow pats are lying in splodges oozing over the emerald grass and dozens of mustard coloured flies delight in their warm moistness. Our feet avoid these as we sit and munch and drink. We are in Northumberland now. In the near distance runs a line of gentle hills, at first green then merging to shades of brown. Trees grow in small copses and the sound of water can be heard across the meadows. I love the picture made by the patches of the softly blue sky between the great boiling clouds which gather and spume to slowly fill the sky from behind the dark rise of the hills. These are the clouds so often painted by the English landscape artists of the 18th and 19th centuries. The sky fills and the rain comes. It begins to pour. We race to load our packs and take the trail once more.

Hoods up, heads down now sloshing through tufty cotton grass and heather growing in the peaty moors we have now entered. Vast and uninviting is Featherstone Common and the walking is wet and lacklustre. The weather is inclement and adds to the disheartening mood of the day. You don't see much when it is raining and what you do see is washed of colour and appeal. And so we trudge on eventually coming to Greenhead. A stone barn is our planned accommodation for the night. First though we go to the hotel for a hot meal. The Landlord is not impressed by our sodden and bedraggled appearance and with a none too subtle eye observes the drip drip of our coats and the rosy shine of our wet faces. Outside the rain streams down. Yes, we are very wet and cannot bring ourselves to go out into the grey, wet night. There is one room available. It doesn't take us long to decide. I can tell you that my sigh of relief is long and smiling.

Day 58 Greenhead to Twice Brewed

What luxury ! A lovely big hotel room in an old hotel at Greenhead. High ceilings and our own bathroom. Last night we washed everything and dried it all on the huge hot radiators. We sleep in this morning and do not have breakfast until 9am. How decadent!

Today a great day, a special day, a day I have looked forward to. Today we meet Hadrian's Wall. The meeting will be a moment of wonderful enlightenment, it will be living history. Mostly though and selfishly perhaps, on this day I hope we will not have to share it with anyone else.

We head north along the Gisland Road out of Greenhead and turn onto a footpath by a row of red brick cottages. A patchy sky is above but, for the moment, the weather is dry. A small bridge takes us across the Pow Charney Burn and already we are walking

through history and timeless legend. The ruins of the almost 700 year old Thirwell Castle stand on a hill before us. The wind and weather damaged walls built from dismantled stones of The Wall look improbable as they are without visible support. We turn right before the castle in the direction pointed by the Pennine Way sign and climb a hill through a woodland and along a walled track by a Roman defensive ditch. This ditch was part of Roman fortifications. We walk in the footsteps of Agricola, Hadrian, Severus and countless others of lesser note but still important to the line of history and life. Out of the fields and along a road to Walltown Quarry then through a wood and along to a small carpark with picnic tables which seems a civilised place to make our coffee.

The wind is fresh and moist, misted with light rain. There are a few tourists in the carpark but we soon lose these as we ascend the rough crags which hold the Wall. I love this rough, wild, airy country with an eagle's view of the land. For us the weather is perfect for this encounter, bleak and moist and giving mystery and timelessness to the day, but how the Romans of such warm blood must have hated it. The Wall holds little of its former glory and even though it has been restored in places, it is still less than half its former form. But it has magic and there are few places like that. To be here, alone as we are on the Sill, its crags and crevices growing some green but mostly showing stone, gleaming in the damp day is an experience to relish, so we go slowly, stopping here and there to perceive the wasteland to the north and let our imagination's roar around our minds.

And it is wonderful.

The Wall runs away before us, ruinous in places, built over in others and at times running in a line of barely showing foundations. The 7 miles takes us most of the day as the walking is tough, up and down the rocky crags but at all times we really feel part of the land and we encounter only a father and his young son together experiencing history and enchantment. A precious day this, a high point of the walk for us. Walk where I have walked, who were you, where did your life take you? Oh the sheer brilliance of it all. Yes, we are all just specks on the map of time. These thoughts strengthen our resolve to achieve our dreams. Few are destined to greatness, most drift through life but all can make a difference even though the difference may not be apparent. So many stones laid by so many hands to complete a task of enormous proportions. And so it can be with life - together.

I feel so privileged.

Inevitably the soft rain turns to a general downpour and the winds come once more to beat and thwack us. Again I felt pity for the ancient guards of these outposts as they stood their vigil on The Wall. So it is heads down again as we make for the Twice Brewed Inn. Legend has it that a King once visited this Inn and found the beer too weak. He ordered it be brewed again, hence the name.

Feeling warm and fuzzy as you do after drying out before a hot fire and filling your belly we make our way through the rain to Craws Nest Farm and our bed for the night. Outside the rain falls in great heavy sweeps from a low grey sky.

Day 59 Twice Brewed to Bellingham

We are ready to face the weather. And what weather it is. Rain beyond anything we have seen. Here is the rain which beats upon us like Wainwrights "raining stair rods". It is pouring. We leave the farm and walk back up to The Wall to Steel Rigg. Nothing is going to keep this rain out of our boots and now we wish we had invested in better waterproof trousers. Our Gortex jackets will keep us dry above our thighs. It is almost impossible to lift your head to see the path ahead, our faces when we lift them, are drenched with water and it is impossible to take a breath.

It is an unexciting and depressing walk along what would have been spectacular on a better day. The Wall, Britain's most important ancient monument, hugs the rocky crags and we climb up and down to again follow this ancient line of history. We keep company with the ancient stones along Peel Crags and down into the sharp clefts of Castle Nick and Sycamore Gap. The path runs over Highshield Crags above Crag Lough on the north side of a stone wall and by the edge of Whin Sill where we come to vertical chasms in the rockface but they hold no fear for we take care where our feet fall. Run those lovely names around your mouth. And still the rain pelts us and washes away the joy of the day. The walking becomes more tedious, exacerbated by the weather and steep climb up to Hotbank Crags. The wall is still imposing and we look out through the watery air to see lakes (maybe flooding?) and marshy land. We are supposed to leave The Wall at Rapishaw Gap but in the torrential rain we miss our turn and soon find ourselves at Housesteads, the finest excavated fort on the Wall. A treat to see even in the rain but we groan at the extra distance we have walked. Returning I am climbing over a stile and Philip, intent on the map to see where we went wrong, comes over too quickly behind me. As I step carefully over the high slippery rock ledges of the stile he nudges me from behind and catapults me into the field beyond. I rise from the soggy earth irritated but unhurt. "What do you think you are doing" I squawk. "I can't read the map **and** watch where I am going" he retorts, gruffly. I blink trying to work that out. Then I laugh loudly. Realising, he laughs too. "I'm sorry" he says several times over.

We are both wading inside our boots and our trousers, legs and socks are saturated. Tiny rivulets are finding their way from my face down my neck so I tighten my hood. What a day.

The walk back is not as long as we feared and we are soon heading away from the Wall north north east over ground that would usually be marshy but today is simply underwater. The rain comes down in torrents and the myriad of tiny burns that criss cross the marsh surge and overflow to drown the land. At times the water is above our knees. "What's a bit more water in the boots?" I say smiling wetly. It is a forlorn trudge

and we are soaked and dispirited. Rises in the land give respite from the water but in places the path is indistinct and we have to rely on our compass for direction. Wark Forest is easier going, then it is across a boggy expanse of wet moorgrass past a small group of stunted pines in a winged sheepfold. It is too wet to stop in this shelter. We have only eaten some chocolate and sipped water since breakfast. We daren't open our packs, the rain will get in.

This is a desolate day and we meet no-one. That is not surprising. Across the stile at the edge of the forest grow Sitka and Norway spruce leaving little space for light and air but the way grows brighter and the trees more varied. The path through the forest is narrow and boggy and all our efforts are spent in picking our way over the firmest ground. In places it looks firm but our feet sink and the watery ground sucks at us. We cross a bleak moor to a hill and an old barn then down past lightly scented hawthorn bushes to Houxty Burn, maybe gentle and welcoming at times but today a raging angry torrent which makes us gasp in awe at the power of nature. Crossing the tiny bridge which spans its fury is a challenge in itself but on the far bank we pass a farm with the somewhat embarrassing name of Shitlington Hall to then climb the sandstone side of Shitlington Crag. Philip's jokes on this subject persist for some time. We laugh as we have imaginary telephone conversations on the subject and find so many ways of pronouncing it to take away the poo.

A tall ladder stile stands at the top of the crag and once over this the going is much easier along a track past a farm and then down to the road and into the little grey border town of Bellingham. This is the wettest we have been and the rain is still tumbling from the sky. We ring several places for B & B - all full. Philip leaves me standing in the rain leaning against a stone wall whilst he goes in search of a room. It seems late but is in reality only 4pm. The afternoon is dark under a low sky and the lights are on in all the buildings. Philip walks up the road toward me and gives me the 'thumbs up' sign. Relieved I smile at him long before his face comes clearly into view and he can respond. The couple at 'Lynn View' are more than hospitable. They take our wet coats and stuff our boots with newspaper, then make us a hot cup of tea. A warm bath follows and a comfortable chair by the fire. Philip braves the rain to get fish and chips and chocolate and we sit unmoving before the television until it is time for bed. Seems we are slipping into unhealthy eating habits. Trouble is there are not many places to buy fresh fruit. However we always manage to carry a few apples in our packs.

I hope it is not raining tomorrow.

Day 60 Bellingham to Byrness

First thing to do is look out the window. Grey skies but no rain at present just the sound of the burn in spate at the end of the garden, hurtling along at a noisy breakneck speed. "I wonder how Linden and 'the Banker boys' fared in that weather yesterday. They will be a day ahead of us" Philip says.

We leave our B & B and head off in different directions to buy provisions. There will be nowhere to buy food for the next 40 miles so we need to stock up. No shops until Kirk Yetholm and the end of the Pennine Way. Seems impossible that we will ever come down to the end of this way. This section of our journey has been somewhere in the vicinity of 250 miles. I carry the food and now my pack is heavy with its lush load.

The grey Westwoodburn Road leads out of town past grey houses under a grey sky, all these things meet to create a picture in monochrome. Over Hareshaw Burn and our feet tread the tarmac up the hill and through a lovely old farmyard, Hareshaw House, past a barn and through a proud stand of trees. A faint bleating catches our attention and we find a tiny lamb trapped in a narrow space between the wire fence and a stone wall. The tiny exhausted creature can neither go forward nor backward, so it cries. I push the fence out as far as I can and Philip leans over, grabbing the lamb by the thinly fleshed skin of its neck and back. With a heave of gusto he pulls it out and drops it kicking and squawking into the field. The lamb gives an exhilarated leap and hightails it up the hill straight to its mother's udders and begins sucking like crazy. We joke with the sheep in the fields we pass "Here comes Philip the sheep's hero - all bow before him". We laugh but the sheep look at us with dark eyes of no particular depth as is their way and then go back to their everyday pastime of munching grass.

Our way leads us then upwards to Lough Shaw, heather, mosses and grass, criss-crossed with trails, probably made by sheep and then into heather clad and grassy moorland to the top of Deer Play. Back into the wilderness and the views are wide and distant over rushes and moss to green hills and forests. Ahead lie more heathery hills, Lord's Shaw and Padon Hill and in the further distance are the higher bare Cheviot Hills. The day is still cloudy, no rain though. Redesdale Forest comes into view but first we have to clamber up a steep edge, the path no longer a path but a waterfall. We pick our way carefully finding solid footfall on slippery rocks and tufts of coarse grass. The top of the hill is no better and we follow a fence. This makes route finding easier but the walking is difficult in mossy, marshy ground and we make many excursions into the field to avoid the worst of it. This is an ancient and lonely place and my mind fills with visions of the wild men who once roamed the land. We slosh on for what seems an age. Along the fence we see several stones with the initials GH. These stones mark the boundary on the old Redesdale estate of Gabriel Hall, High Sheriff of Northumberland in 1705.

Then the Way plunges into the conifer crowded tracks of Redesdale Forest and walking is easier along wide flinted Forestry Roads. The weather is relegated to the treetops for down where we walk the world is sheltered, eerie and softly twilight. The huge Norway Spruce trees crowd and darken the way and beneath their heavy green lies a dark and eerie midnight world that belongs to the goblins of Scandinavian Fairy Tales. Channels of racing peat coloured water rush beneath the trees to be swallowed up in the endless night of the forest world.

Eventually after many miles the land opens out and we walk by the River Rede past two farms with exceptionally long names - Blackhopeburnhaugh and Cottonshopeburnfoot -

what a mouthful. Imagine how tiresome it would be to give your address and have to spell all that.

Today we feel we have entered a new phase of our journey. Scotland is only 40 or so miles ahead and the Pennine Way drawing to its last and longest hurdle, the long lonely miles over the Cheviots. But as with each of the other long distance paths we experience exhilaration and also some sadness to come to the final footsteps. But of course beyond is Scotland and a new chapter and a different scene awaits.

Our eyes search for a glimpse of our destination. Eventually through the trees and nestling in a clearing amongst the dark green of the tree covered hills, lies the forestry village of Byrness. The Hotel sits at the hem of the hill, its chimneys sending smoke to meet and blend with the shifting grey of the clouds and mist above. The hilltops are shrouded beneath the clouds but it is a sight most welcome to us who are worn out, hungry and footsore.

Still no rain, so we camp between the tumbling barns in a walled enclosure behind the hotel. We have company for dinner by the pub fire this evening, some other walkers who were out for the day from York and then later Terry and Stephanie who are also walking the Pennine Way. Terry and Stephanie give us news of Linden. They saw him last night and he asked them to pass on his best wishes if they saw us. No news of the 'Banker boys'.

There are bee hives right by our tent but we are too tired to worry and just want to sleep and rest our bones.

Day 61 Byrness to Mountain Refuge Hut

Grey light filters through the tent and a steady rain beats its soft music. What more rain? And that will mean misty mountains and maybe a day walled in white. I groan and turn to look at Philip who is still sleeping peacefully at my side, his face scrunched into his clothes bag which he uses as a pillow. "Wake up Philip, it's time to meet the day". None too happy with the weather Philip leans on his elbow and waits whilst I dress and roll up my bedding. The tent is too small for us to both do this at the same time. The day is very cold as well as wet. I make several dashes to the ruined barn with our equipment and we hang the tent there out of the rain, across an old door leaning on the wall to drip whilst we go into the pub for breakfast.

Over breakfast we discuss our plan for the day. The walking ahead, with 3,300 ft of ascent is bleak, remote and not for the faint hearted. There are plenty of warnings that we should have an escape route planned if things turn nasty. We decide it is too far for us to walk to Kirk Yetholm in one day so we will have to camp along the way. We read that there is a patch of turf amid a sea of heather by the Border Gate but the day holds unknowns and we are entering the loneliest and most remote area of England.

We leave Byrness village and walk by the notoriously fast A68 through a gate and into a mixed conifer plantation. The climb out of Byrness is steep, sharp and its line is straight up. We are grateful for the hearty breakfast in our stomachs. The ridge is gained after a quick scramble up the rock edge to the brow of Byrness Hill. The rain has stopped and a light mist drifts freshly across our faces. We feel exhilarated and look out over the dark forest melting into the misty distance. We stride off along the ridge to Windy Crag and we are now part of a different world and our eyes follow the line of high bulky bare hills as they roll out ahead of us, their uppermost heights hidden in the clouds, their mood threatening. By the time we reach the top of Ravens Knowe the mist is beginning to thicken and away to our east lies a danger area, an army firing range and Ministry of Defence Land.

At OGRE Hill it seems appropriate we should enter the world of white we find ourselves walking in. The views which must be fine, are obliterated. The walking becomes boggy and depressing before we descend to lower ground to the little stream that far away grows into the River Coquet. The mist has cleared a little and we have better vision at Chew Green and pass an area of Roman earthworks of old camps. Chew Green was an extensive encampment and the earthworks extend over an area of approximately 250 square metres. Chew Green is on the old Roman road of Dere Street below the Cheviot ridge. This must have been a desperate and lonely place and we silently salute the fortitude of the soldiers who once occupied this camp. We meet not a soul and the path is sketchy in places and trails lead off hither and thither. We are grateful of the few Pennine Way signs which reassure us our path is right. To be lost on these lonely bare hills in the mist is not a happy thought. I begin to believe that the fog could last for days. It is earth's ends.

As we gain height the air thickens with mist to be almost soupy and we walk as though encased in a white balloon. A few wild goats stray into our vision and depart, their footfall and gentle bleating coming back to us distorted by the fog. Our relief is great when after following the pale path that is Dere Street we meet the England/Scotland border fence. This is to be our companion now for many miles. I relax somewhat and we continue to tread Agricola's ancient way. Again we are quiet. The Pennine Way has drained us. We encourage each other for there is no turning back, no giving up. With luck and health we will see it through to the end.

Lamb Hill goes on and up and down, seemingly forever, its elevation ~~1677~~ft, but there are no views for us and we follow and trust the border fence to guide our journey away from these misty, bleak and windswept hilltops which are miles from anywhere.

Our next major summit is Beefstand Hill – these are very meaty names. Beyond this hill the terrain apparently drops quite spectacularly but any view is a forlorn hope in these conditions.

The weather turns wet and wildly and bitterly windy, the walking woeful as we wend our way up the impressively steep and stony slope of Windy Gyle. The rise is relentless. It could be worse, there could be snow instead of swirling mists bathing us in an intense

freezing wetness. It certainly feels cold enough. We are not afraid of the weather for we are well prepared. The day has been a bad one with nothing to gaze upon. I fancy that this would be a wonderful walk on a fine day, far from the world and without care. But for us today it is a sad reflection of the grandeur of other days and we can but ponder and imagine. Camping will not be a good alternative in this sort of weather and region.

We reach Clennel Street and the ground is soaked. It is strange to call this empty piece of land "a street". We make a decision to walk the extra 8 miles to the Mountain Refuge Hut and spend the night there. It is 5pm, we have walked 14 hard miles. We are very tired but we do not want to be caught out in this weather. It has the feel that it can only get worse.

The gruelling walking continues. Water is very low and my mind races and I yearn for a cool drink. Then I remember we still have two apples left. I shout to Philip who is ahead and we stop half way up a hill amid deeply marshy ground, moss and tufty grass growing on or beside pools of brown peaty water. I bite into my apple. The sensation of sweet, slightly acid freshness attacks every dried out taste bud. My mind soars, maybe this is how a heroine addict feels. I won't move, I can't move, my body is captured by deliciousness. Philip's face shows the same rapture but he laughs at my expression. "We must be bonkers to be here climbing these desolate hills in such atrocious conditions, he says "if it wasn't for the apples, we'd go bananas". Philip always laughs at his own jokes. He laughs when I make his jokes as well.

We move on and fill our water bottles in the peaty water. We saw dead animals earlier and hope there are none nearby to putrefy this water. Thirst commands your every thought. We anticipated there would be good water to be found along the way, but it lies tired and unmoving in the marshy pools. How can the ground be so boggy when we are so high? Oh it is so dreary and unrewarding so late in the day and we are so deep in the cold, white-wind blasted hills.

Philip inclines his head towards mine and our voices move quietly between us. Our faces are closed and pale, the effort and lack of visible communication with the land around us has drained us. Finally we reach the hilltop and walking is easier on a boardwalk, its passage taking us through an eerie world of black peat rising in small hillocks amongst the oozing hungry pools. I shudder at the memory of Black Hill and hasten my steps to pass. Philip wants to stop and take photos but I can feel panic rising from my stomach and we hurry on. At the junction of fences we say a firm no to a detour up The Cheviot which is totally obscured by the mist. I wonder if anyone would make that detour, they would be stout of heart if they did. More boardwalk and liquid peat, Surely no-one walked here before the boardwalk. What a nightmare! Hades' heaven.

We slog over rough, bleak and remote ground to Auchope Cairn which is a cold, exposed and craggy place with a ruinous stone shelter. We decline its corner from the wind and start to make our way down to the Mountain Rescue Hut. The descent is sharp and we hold the fence wire for support as we struggle to stay upright in the rocky scree and muddy slides of the steep slope. The wind howls and my hands are very very swollen and red making it painful to hold the wire. My imagination fills with pictures of us passing

the rescue hut unseen in the mist. Logic counteracts and tells me that these conditions would not be unusual up here and the hut will be right on the path, but fear and logic see-saw in my mind. I feel a whimp because I am afraid. Further down the hill the ground is boggy and deeply wet. There is definitely no-where to camp. Philip checking map, distance and time calls into the wind "we should have reached it by now". Very encouraging! I can hear the roar of water in the white wetness to my right and wonder what is there. It is so so frustrating not to be able to see. The walk to the hut feels as though time is an elastic drawn ever more taut and we are almost upon it when its dark form takes shape in the mist. And yes, you guessed it, my eyes fill with tears of relief and exhaustion. The wind gives a scream as it roars up the mountains and my tears are icy on my face.

The wooden hut is small, not much bigger than a bus shelter. Inside it is dark with a concrete floor and narrow benches line three walls. It has the feel of somewhere empty and unlived in. I suppose "dank" would be a good word for it. A small high window lets in a soft glimmer of the eerie light but our relief is clear in our tired faces as we close the big wooden door on the world outside. Here, for now, we are safe and will soon be warm.

We take off our soaking boots and socks, put on some dry socks, hang up our coats and cook up some soup and noodles, using the peaty water. The warmth creeps slowly and sleep comes. The hardness and narrowness of the bench are of no consequence. Our bodies demand sleep. The wind flies up the mountain but it cannot even rattle the door.

Day 62 Mountain Refuge Hut to Kirk Yetholm

This hut gives me nightmares! Awoke several times in the night yearning for a long cool drink and remembering the relish with which we ate our apples yesterday. There are many lessons to be learned and thankfulness for food is one of them. After sardines on an unappetisingly dry roll and a cup of acrid tea made from the peaty water (2 purification tablets and a good boil!) we leave our refuge for the misty-moisty-icy morning. It is like walking into yesterday, nothing has changed. The hour is very early but the nights are short and somewhere above our eerie white world the sun shines. The bitter wind steals through the gaps in our clothing and touches our warm skin. I shiver at its touch and tighten the cord on my hood. It is a new day. Today we descend into Scotland.

The climb up The Schil, elevation 1985ft, the last of the big hills of the Cheviots, is short and sharp. The ground is again a quagmire and the effort is all put into picking our way around the worst of the bog. Little tufts of coarse grass make the only firm footing as we slip and slop our way up the hill. At the top we gulp the last of our fresh water, saved for today. It is like nectar, sweet and light, never did a drink taste so good, so clear, cold and pure. The hilltop is craggy and again we wish for some views, we feel trapped and are eager to descend below the mist to sight. It is downhill all the way, following the border fence to a ladder stile in the wall between The Schill and Black Hag. Now we are finally

in Scotland after walking so long on its edge. The way is green and firm underfoot. Our faces grin - only 4 1/2 miles to go. "We've almost cracked you, you bloody Pennine way" Philip shouts to the hills.

With our descent the mist thins and ahead lies a farm and the landscape begins to change and offers trees, pasture and sheep. We walk along a good path amongst green hills. We have scenery - wonderful! Bright racing burns bubble with good clean water. We stop to drink our fill. The sheep bleat and move out of our way. Remote as it is we feel we have found our world again. We cross a bridge over a racing burn and meet a tarmac road and follow its winding way into Kirk Yetholm. It is not yet morning tea time when we walk into the little border town and finish our most difficult miles. It is such a relief, we have conquered the Pennine Way. This walk of walks has thrown some arduous and tough tests our way but amazingly we have passed them all. On this I have to reflect for it is, for me, rather incredible. Along the way we have met many wonderful people and heard of a number who had given up after only a couple of days. Here we are bounding down the final mile. Our senses reel. Philip lets out a whoop and bursts into the chorus of an old Scottish ballad "let the wind blow high, let the wind blow low, darlin' where's me trousers....." We laugh until the tears run down our faces all tiredness momentarily gone as we hug and almost skip our way to the first B & B.

It is early but the greeting is warm "For goodness sake, will 'ee come in and 'ave a cup of tea". "Cup of tea? No", I reply "would you have a big glass of orange squash please".

The chair by the door is hard and straight and forces me to sit the same way. My wet weather gear hangs on the hooks close by. It looks well used now. It looks as though it belongs to a real traveller. My boots too, sitting on the floor beneath my coat are darkly wet and much scuffed. This still feels like a dream you know. I can't believe it is really me doing this great thing. When it is finished, I tell myself, life will never be the same again. Or will it? Ruts deepen as we walk them, back and forth and their tow is strong, it is weighted by the \$ sign.

My drink comes. Philip's too. "You know," I say "I have been dreaming of this moment all night. I could hardly sleep for the wishing of it. Lying on that bench in the rescue hut, it is all I could think of." He laughs "You'll be enjoy'n your wee drink then". The cool liquid touches my lips and washes around my mouth, its slightly acid sweetness surprising my taste buds. What a wonder is the simplest of things. Philip drains his glass. Oh yes, now for a hot bath. Funny I rarely have a bath in Australia. Australians shower.

Not yet time for rest. We walk to the black and white Border Hotel to photograph the 'end of Pennine Way' sign boldly scribed on the wall. Now we have walked the length of England. That is phenomenal, can you imagine it? I have done it and I find it amazing. Tomorrow begins a new chapter.

Day 63
Kirk Yetholm to Kelso

A glimmer of sunshine shows between the clouds then is gone in the grey again. Hope it does not rain today.

Feel very tired after the Pennines and Philip does too. It is weird. Here again at the end of another of the Long Distance Ways of our walk we become subdued and silent losing some of our impetus and enthusiasm. I think it must be that you strive for an end only to find a beginning but then isn't that life?

Breakfast is a fellowship of walkers at a round table, none has walked the Pennines let alone from Lands End and we find that our efforts earn the respect of our fellows. It seems we are walking the dreams of many. Philip likes this and is eager to share our experiences.

It is 8 miles to Kelso and the walking is mostly by road. We have deliberately chosen this path rather than over the hills as we want a short day and need to rest some more. At Kelso we have to buy maps and supplies for the next stage of 80 miles to Edinburgh.

And so the walking is fairly uneventful. The narrow road is hedge lined and we find the passing traffic offensive and worrisome but these are fast miles and in no time we enter the busy town of Kelso on the River Tweed. We cross Rennie's Bridge, built in 1800 to replace the earlier bridge washed away 3 years before, into the town and walk past the ruins of the 12th century abbey still showing evidence of being one of the finest examples of Romanesque architecture.

This is the largest town we have seen since Lichfield. It is such a change of environment to sit on a bench in a cobbled square lined by imposing Georgian and Victorian buildings. Kelso has been a centre of trading through history and the street names are evidence of this. Woodmarket, Peat Wynd, Horsemarket, Oven Wynd, Coal Market and Distillery Lane all lead to this conclusion. We feel both estranged and strangers to the crowds of people busy with their lives. Still we are the outsiders, the passers by and our lives at the moment are so far removed what is normal. We are unencumbered souls wandering the land, free to enjoy and fully absorb and appreciate the gift of this country that is brimming with the colours and wonders of nature.

I have finally bought a pair of gloves. Thick, black woolley ones.

It will be comfort tonight. Lots of treats, a warm cosy bed, a large centrally heated room and rest, rest, rest.

Day 64
Kelso to Melrose

What a lovely day, the sky showing patches of rain washed blue that promise sunshine. We leave Kelso by the Selkirk Road following the mighty Tweed then after crossing a bridge take a path down to the River and walk on its banks. After all the rain the river is full and muddy, it eddies and sweeps along looking dangerous and wild. The grass underfoot is freshly slashed and we make good time to Roxburgh Mill. It is a green and pleasant walk and it is agreeable to again be down in the valleys away from hill and mist. Soothing are the watery sounds of the river. Gentle is the day. Large are the trees that grow along the banks. Mild and quiet is the air. All is wonderful in Scotland.

From Roxburgh Mill we amble along tiny narrow lanes. Over the low stone walls (or dykes as the Scots call them) a field of soft yellow green rye shifts and ripples in the light wind before the deep backdrop of the Eildon Hills. The Eildon Hills, home to the Queen of the Fairies. The magic borderlands of Scotland. This is a treat and a joy and we are alone. So beautiful. Walking is delightful, sun breaking through and lighting the land, deepening and brightening the colours.

The Eildon Hills were once volcanic cores, hard rock which survived while the surrounding earth and rock was slowly worn away by the elements. When the Romans came in about 80AD there was an established town of around 300 huts with fortifications on top of the North Hill of the Eildons. It covered an area of about 38 acres. It is believed to have been settled by a Celtic tribe of the Selgovae.

The Romans built Trimontium at the foot of this town. Trimontium was an important fortified garrison which the Romans named after the three peaks of the Eildons.

Much of interest can today be seen on this dramatic landmark. There are Celtic hill fortifications, sacred grove sites, peat bogs, acid heathland and many varieties of bird life such as red grouse and heath, water and woodland birds.

However, it is the myths associated with the Eildon Hills that are perhaps the most fascinating and lead people to wonder and dream. Some say that deep in a hidden vault beneath the hills lie King Arthur and his knights. Another faerie tale relates to the Eildon Hills being a gateway to Faerie realms. This is the tale of Thomas the Rhymer (1220-1297). Thomas loved to go and lie beneath his favourite Eildon tree. One day, in his youth, he saw the exquisite Queen of the Elves riding towards him astride her a beautiful white horse. She wore rainments of silk and velvet in the hue of green and from her horse's flying mane there hung fifty nine softly chiming musical silver bells.

Thomas was entranced and bowed down as she approached. She smiled, radiating beauty, and asked him to kiss her. He fell instantly in love and agreed to go with her and be her lover for seven years. He climbed up onto her magical steed behind her and the horse leapt into a gallop, flying like the wind and carrying them far from the land of mortals into Elfland.

Thomas had to promise that when he returned to the land of mortals and his town of Ercildoune he would speak naught of what he had learned in Elfland. Full of love for the beautiful Queen, he agreed but soon the 7 years had passed. Before he left the Queen led him by the hand into a flower and fruit laden garden where she picked an apple from a tree and gave it to Thomas, saying, "Take this for thy wages Thomas, it will give thee a tongue that can never lie". So Thomas became known as "True Thomas".

Thomas returned to Ercildoune. He told why he had been gone for seven years but never broke his promise to his Queen. Thomas, however, found he had the gift of prophecy.

One of his most famous prophecies, recorded in the history of Scotland is a prediction regarding the death of King Alexander III. Thomas predicted this on the wild and stormy night of 18th March, 1286. This was the night before the King died. He also predicted the Battle of Bannockburn, the Jacobite uprisings and the Union of the Crowns of Scotland and England. But these were just a few of his prophecies.

We meet a Scotsman fixing his tractor in a stone barn opposite a fairytale cottage of quaint architecture, little windows like eyes, peeping from its roof and built of deep blue/red stone. The house is dotted with huge replicas of gaudy butterflies and families of stone gnomes and rabbits live in abundance in the flower filled garden. The man looks gnomish himself with his full fluffy beard and his eyes that hold a mistily sad twinkle. We strike up a conversation with him. "We love your house" Philip says "Aye, it's one of the few originals hereabouts" he replies. "Who put all the gnomes and animals in the lovely garden" I ask. "Ooo, aye, that be me. The borderlands 'ave been me 'ome all me life but family is all gone now. All dead. These wee fellows are ma wee friends. Some'un to come 'ome to each evening". My heart catches in my chest and I can see Philip also feels compassion. The Scotsman's little gnomes and rabbits with their permanent smiles keep him from being lonely.

We leave him behind to meet the River Tweed once again. How different it all looks in the sunshine. Birds dip and dive, flowers abound and it is Summer. St. Boswell's comes and goes and we walk along an old 'A' road, now converted to a cycleway which takes us in a direct line to Melrose. It is strange to walk on a road like this and not expect traffic. The walking is very picturesque and I am stunned by the abundance of tall and elegant trees, verdant and glistening in the sunshine.

"And see not ye that bonny road
which winds about the fernie brae?
that is the road to fair Elfland
Where you and I this night main gae"
... Thomas Rymer (anon)

At the end of this road as we pass the conical and golden gorse spattered Eildon Hills, we come across an old moss covered stone enclosed in a small iron work fence. The stone resembles a grave stone and bears the inscription

"Here stood the Eildon Tree where Thomas the Rhymer met the Queen of the Fairies and so began Scottish muse".

We stop and look about, indeed an enchanted landscape, fair and mysterious and I long to be atop the hill to maybe catch of glimpse of fairy. "No, I don't think so" Philip says, reading my mind "we are tired as it is. Let's push on to Melrose". I log it in my mind. Someday we'll watch the moon rise from that hilltop.

A civilised campsite tonight and the company of a young German couple who give us much advice on crossing the Grampian and Cairngorm Mountains via the glens. Together we pour over maps and we become excited at the adventure and beauty ahead of us.

Day 65
Melrose to Innerleithen

A day of the most noble trees I have ever seen. Magnificent in their multitude and variety. What a joy it is and what precious days these are, free and together heading north to John o'Groats.

Our way out of Melrose is unfortunately a 'B' road. Scotland does not have the network of public footpaths that England does and so there will be more road walking now and that no doubt will be hard on the feet. The weather is improving and is bordering on pleasant. Slight breezes blow across us tantalising us with their fresh earthiness. This road turns out to be more a small country lane and we are not bothered by cars, we have it to ourselves.

I ponder the Scottish people and whether they are different to the English. The first thing is the accent and I believe a more angular turn to the features with paler skin. We find everyone we meet is friendly and warm with eyes that twinkle hinting at sense of humour. I am sure there are lots of grouchy people too, maybe we will meet them as time goes by. Pubs are plainer and there is a general austerity and strength in the buildings which must reflect attitudes and a premise for living. The atmosphere in shops and pubs is welcoming and patrons say a friendly "hey up" in preamble to an inquisitive chat. We feel comfortable in Scotland. When people we meet find we have come from Lands End the usual reply is "well, you are over the worst part" followed by a deep Scottish chuckle. They laugh with a Scottish accent and also like their own jokes. That makes me smile. One thing is for sure, they don't seem keen on the English.

We are enjoying ourselves immensely and the walking is easy. Our fitness levels must be very high by now and we stride along with easy steps.

Again the walking is wonderful as we walk part of St. Cuthbert's Way and the River Tweed is still our intermittent companion. We stop in a field resting on a slight rise above a stone wall for morning tea. Our outlook is pleasing - over a gentle valley of soft green to the silver bubbling river beyond. When the sun shines we feel hot and begin to peel off our clothes but when the clouds blow in it becomes very cool and we have to put them back on again.

As we walk I think about our health. We have not had a day's sickness between us. We are hot and cold, wet and dry and always walking but we have warded off the germs. It seems our bodies are much too busy to welcome any viruses. Also we have not had a cross word and our time together has been a joy. Our relationship has always been even and strong but perhaps all this walking releases any tension build up. Also the sense of freedom is a great elixir. Perhaps all married couples should now and then go on a long hike to be together without life's worries tagging along.

Philip is still asking "is that a bull?" His arm goes out in front of me, halting my progress. Soon I hope he will be able to tell the difference. I think though, that now this is a

bit of a joke with him, he is tricking me, although it is hard to be sure. Usually there is just one bull in the field with cows and we give it a wide berth. You can never be sure. I believe if the bull is with cows it will not concern itself with us, it is when a bull is alone in a field that it will attack with relish.

Trees grow like weeds from the lush earth!!! The wind rustles the leaves which are still a pure and bright spring green and so many stories fly through the mind - childhood memories of summer days dreaming in the deep shade wedged in the crook of a tree's solid branches. The thoughts and dreams of many have stirred with the winds of the ages through the leaves of these trees. The feel of the lives that have passed over this land is overwhelming and always on my mind. It is the ordinary lives I contemplate. Contrast Australia's short European history and small population with Great Britain and my wondering is understood.

Back down to the River Tweed and across an old stone bridge which stretches in an curving arch over the now narrow river. We turn right along a private road and walk through a beautiful estate. Someone owns all this. How amazing for them. Low stone walls dividing neat gardens which are webbed with paths above and fall below the lane. Summer flowers are everywhere, on the ground, in the walls and struggling between the slabs of the paths. The languid air is trembling with the hum of honey bees and the flutter of stray blossom. Huge walls of brilliantly coloured rhodendrums rise beneath the trees and everywhere is beauty. We lunch amid this loveliness sitting in an angler's hut (such luxury to have a seat) from where we can view our surroundings and then continue on to Innerleithen where we cross the river by an old railway bridge and enter a campsite. Innerleithen, surrounded by the hills and forests of the Tweed valley, is the eighth largest settlement in the Scottish Borders and is near the junction of Leithen Water and the River Tweed in the eastern part of Tweeddale. Tweeddale sounds as though it should be in a nursery rhyme.

Worn-out and footsore we erect our tent then make our way into the town for a pub meal. I order vegetarian lasagne but when it arrives it is very disappointing. It is boiled sheets of pasta stacked with tepid semi cooked green vegetables, sliced tomatoes, tomato paste and half melted grated cheddar. Oh dear!!! Seems the art of Italian cooking has not yet arrived here, it is just an idea they have, not a skill. We learn that this town was famous as a spa in the 19th century for the mineral spring of Doo's Well. Doo's Well? Who was Doo?

It has been another long day.

Day 66 Innerleithen to Peebles

Shorts today under a vivid blue sky unblemished by cloud or threat of rain. As we wend our way along the east flowing river through the narrow Tweed valley the hills are growing and some of them are heavily posted with woodland. Others are bare soft green

but for bright splashes of yellow gorse and peat capped tops. Looks as though this was once the path of a glacier.

Again lovely walking but today the colours are clean in the pure light and the leaves glisten promising growth in the happy sunshine. The sheep in the fields are now pink and naked and they must be grateful for the warm day.

This is a day of uneventful, warm and pleasant walking. A day of restoration of the spirits. More a wander than a walk. Still in the company of the River Tweed we come to the outskirts of Peebles. It sits across the Tweed, set amongst the hills, a lovely old town, houses of cut grey stone, with little crenellated turrets and windows peeping from the rooftops. The church has such an interesting spire, tall and elaborate, and the scene is a perfect picture. We stop momentarily to absorb the ambience and then cross the river via an old suspension bridge which I believe is called "The Priorsford Bridge". We wander along the spacious High Street by the old Mercat Cross and off the High Street are pends (vaulted or arched passageways, especially from the street to the back of a group of houses) and alleyways where craft workers turn wood or craft bagpipes. Time to treat ourselves to a sit down lunch of haddock and chips. Every meal seems to come with chips. Certainly this is acceptable for fish but pasta and rice dishes also come with a bowl of chips. I have difficulty with this having been brought up to make sure I have just one serving of a carbohydrate food at each meal. Our diet is changing and is very different from what we normally eat. It is basically not that healthy, although we eat lots of fruit and cheese, etc., but it seems that deep fried food is the most available and the cheapest.

The coat of arms of Peebles bears the inscription "Against the stream they multiply" which must refer to the salmon. We are told the town gets its name from the Celtic word 'pebyll' for tent and this was probably once a campsite for nomadic tribesmen. Everywhere seems to have a history in the thousands of years.

It is an ordinary walk through a neat residential area to the Rosetta campsite. We are camped on a small hill and the field is bordered on two sides by trees. Nevertheless a wind has come up and it is beginning to get very cold. We put on our thermal underwear and boots with no socks (what a sight!) and wash and dry all our clothes in the campsite laundry and then crawl into our sleeping bags, still wearing our underwear. The other campers must wonder "what" we are. Fit or not, we get very very tired.

Day 67 Peebles to West Linton

We have a tiny radio and hear that the forecast for today is rain so we rise early, around 5am, in an effort to pack a dry tent. It is so heavy to carry when it is wet. We manage to beat the rain and head off over the yellow gorse covered hills following a faint tyre track. The rain isn't long in coming and we walk yet once again through the damp countryside. We have had so much rain on this journey. "It is a wonder we haven't turned mouldy" Philip says. Perhaps that is just the way it is. I believe Britain has a maritime climate

and the weather blows in from the sea across this tiny land giving lots of rain and quick changes to the sky. The elements are impulsive, like a bored child. To be positive though, the grass is green and nature proliferates because there is always lots to drink.

The compass directs us up a gentle rise between a farm and a long line of wind breaking trees to a small lane which winds off into the distance between empty hills. This we follow for some miles. A silly sheep finds its way through the fence to the lane before us and scuttles along, turning every hundred yards or so to look and see if we are still following. Of course we are still behind and it kicks its hooves in fright and clatters off again. This goes on for miles until we take a narrow lane left up into the now forest covered hills. It is still raining but we are very hungry so we push our way into a small woodland and sit on a log beneath the comparative shelter of the thick canopy of leaves above. We eat and drink and feel warmer in spite of the drips and we are refreshed as we begin walking again. "Have another biscuit Philip" I say. I am always keen for us to eat as much as we can for it lightens my load.

We are now miles from any clustered development and the sight of people. A remote farm marks the end of civilisation for some hours and as we skirt a field full of young bulls the heavily forested hills rise high and away before us. My heart skips a beat as I see their tops are in the clouds. I don't like the mist, not one little bit. It is greedy to swallow up travellers to hold them prisoner wandering aimlessly in its depths. The whole of the countryside is wet, the dark spongy earth clings in clumps to our boots, long grasses collapse under our foot fall shedding showers of droplets like scattered diamonds and bushes and trees sway in the gentle breeze which shakes down the drips, to land heavily upon us.

Looking at the map the way appears clear but this does not prove the case.

We soon enter another world and the wind dies.

Dark pine and spruce compete for light and space and the carpet of green over the lofty hills is endless and without relief. Our path runs across the top of the field and then enters the twilight world beneath the trees. There is no sun and no colour. The dark air here is thick and unmoving. The rain can't penetrate except in occasional big heavy drips. On we go through the eerie stillness. Ahead every now and then we can see a fluorescent orange marker on a tree indicating the way of the path. These are a blessing as the trees are planted in neat rows and no definite path is apparent. Wild creatures don't live here, the only sound is the wind in the tree tops. The rich earth is springy beneath the russet brown pine needles and the large roots of the trees knot and gnarl over the ground, waiting to trip the unwary. It is very dark, almost dark enough to need a torch. Ahead at the end of sight we can see a pinprick of brightness where the path leaves the woods for a firebreak. After a time we reach this and we cross and enter the forest again on the other side.

The mist comes down like a pall of smoke and we are lost. There is nothing to take a compass bearing on, just trees and more trees and mist and more mist. We are sightless

in a still, dark world. Paths on the ground are not on the map and vice versa. This is a constantly changing environment managed by man. Plant and fell is the mandate for this plantation. We walk on and on hoping for some clue and after several hours come to a large area of fenced farmland. We tread the lane but there are no buildings in sight. The mist thins. The roar of a tractor makes us stop. We wait. Its dirty blue form rumbles around the corner followed by a jeep. We wave down the jeep. "Excuse me mate, we are a bit lost and wonder if you can direct us" Philip says politely. But... he is a rude man. One of the few we have met. His anger spits out of him in a string of heavily accented expletives. He doesn't like strangers and he doesn't like walkers. Private is his favourite word...well maybe second favourite!! We remain calm for we need to know where we are amongst the millions of trees and endless hills. He begrudgingly points out the place on the map. "Bloody hell" groans Philip "how did we get that far out of our way". The jeep driver smirks creating an evil face and drives off.

We study the map and devise a plan to walk back. It's going to be a long day.

We find a path which leads up the hill along the edge of the forest. The forests dark depths lurk menacingly to our right and Philip feels we should enter it and walk back down the hill but I am loath to do this as the way is dark and dense with branches and once inside we may not find our way out again. We soon find ourselves on a narrower track which clings impossibly to the side of the hill and the walking would be easier if we could suction our feet and be horizontal to the hillside, impossible of course. It is unbelievably difficult making ankles twist and bend. Unfortunately we have then to enter the forest and the way is now heavy underfoot with mud and the mist is still thickly about us. Hours later we leave the forest and find ourselves on a high mist shrouded hill by a stone wall. We follow the wall simply for security in the lack of visibility and eventually begin to descend. This descent gives us sight and we stand on the hillside looking out at the dreamlike beauty of the valley before us trying to match it to the map.

This we finally do and find we were about 8 miles from where we are supposed to be. We slip and slide down the steep hillside and cross a wide and speeding burn by a narrow, mossy wooden plank about four yards long. I go first, treading carefully as the racing burn is several yards below me and is punctuated with sharp rocks. (I use imperial measurements because we are in England and this is how they appear to gauge distance and measurement) Philip's turn. He is always confident in these situations but suddenly his right foot slips and his left foot skates forward. I think he will fall or do the splits. My heart stands still as I watch his slide in seeming slow motion as he sways and bends regaining his balance only teeter on the brink almost losing it again. He bends almost to the point of falling before gathering that momentum and leaping a giant leap to the safety of the further bank. His walking stick flies into the burn but this is easily retrieved by clambering down the bank. So hearts sinking at the thought of all those extra miles we lift one weary foot in front of the other and head for West Linton.

Our feet are sore with the pain of the 26+ miles we have walked when we finally come to West Linton. Ahead by the side of the road is parked a red four wheel drive and the lady

behind the wheel smiles at us and we reciprocate and so stop and ask if there are any B & B's in town. She asks about our journey.

In the town Philip walks through many doors but returns shrugging his shoulders. There is a fair on the next day and all accommodation is full. Looks as though we have to find a campsite and camp in the rain. The red four wheel drive reappears and its driver asks if we have had any luck in finding accommodation. "No", is our weary reply. "Jump in" she says "I have a farm outside town where I sometimes do B & B and I will bring you back into town tomorrow". And so we meet Kate and later that evening her husband John. What fine, good people and what a lovely evening we spend with them, chatting over food and wine in their big farmhouse kitchen. How is it you meet some people and the conversation is easy, even familiar whereas with others there is none at all? We feel so at ease in the company of Kate and John. Kate asks us to join them for dinner and we discover that she is a good cook as well!!

Outside the rain comes down in great sweeping sheets. Our feet climb the stairs heading for bed and I think with a groan that the Pentland Hills will be wet and misty tomorrow.

Day 68 West Linton to Edinburgh

usually guests are served in the 'other' room. 'Other' separates them and keeps them strangers. The kitchen is acceptance and specialness. The chat is familiar and the hand that passes the plate also passes friendship. Kate moves around her kitchen busy with looking after us. I like it here in Kate's kitchen, the air moves with memories, her memories and as she chats small moving pictures flash in the corners and her memories take shape in our minds. We would like to dally here and understand and share more of their world but outside the road is waiting for our feet and Kate, true to her word, drives us back into West Linton to take up our trail again.

After yesterday's bother in the forest and mist on the hilltops we look up to the Pentland Hills and see their heads are in the clouds and so decide to walk the lowland to Edinburgh. We may later regret this but I think we can be forgiven for we have come such a long way. Through the moors, a little dreary maybe, but we have had enough of hills for the moment. The weather forecast is for rain and heavy mist on the hills but as time passes the sun comes out, the sky clears blue and we do have a tinge of regret that we did not walk the hills. The lovely Pentland hills that rise purple, green and yellow to our left.

So we must leave our hill walking and scrambling over Scald Law and the other high hills of the Pentlands for another day. We have taken the easy road which leads quietly and narrowly to a main road and into Edinburgh and it is all rather uneventful.

The campsite on the outskirts of the city is large and impressive but tomorrow we will pack up and walk the footpaths to the centre of town and book a B & B for the next two nights for tomorrow we are to have a 'lay day' and see the sights from a tourist's eyes.

Day 69 Edinburgh

Rain patters on the tent and the wind gently lifts the nylon. It is such a bother packing up but we do, anxious to see the city of Edinburgh.

More footpath walking.

Eventually B & B's begin to appear in the Georgian terraces along the road. We say "eeny, meeny, miney, mo" and choose one. The room is up many many stairs right at the very top of the house. I suppose the owner thinks we are fit and it is no bother. Outside on the main road we catch a bus into the city. What a great place. We walk the Royal Mile up to Edinburgh Castle and then spend a pleasant day wandering without the encumbrance of our backpacks. We feel so light and so swift of foot.

Philip needs new boots so we buy those. An expedition into Marks and Spencers and the joy of choosing from all the wonderful things to eat then back to our room.

Mmm, this Marks and Spencers food is so good. I can never seem to fill my stomach. It calls out for food all the time. Philip even more so, but he always loves his food so much. "I could eat that again" he always says. Prawn salad, neat little pink prawns curled lazily on a salmony pink cream on a bed of lettuce. Succulent chicken, crusty light bread, raspberry trifle, swiss chocolate, crisps and a big bottle of raspberry juice. Delicious. All this spread out in our room as though a fine picnic by a river and then consumed into our thin bodies. What heaven to rest our weary feet and fill our craving stomachs. We laugh and murmur with satisfaction as we eat and we smile at each other a lot. Sharing every day and every thing is such fun.

Day 70 Edinburgh

This is a holiday day.

We rise late and have Scottish porridge for breakfast followed by Scottish bacon and eggs and homemade jam for our toast. Our host is such a funny, friendly man with a big white apron and he makes the jam.

It is still raining when we catch the bus to the city centre. Edinburgh city stands on volcanic rocks shaped by glaciers to provide the excellent defensive site of Castle Rock, on which Edinburgh Castle sits. Edinburgh extends eastwards from the castle, running down what is now known as the Royal Mile. Down below Castle Rock is a pattern of broad streets and attractive squares which are edged with classical facades of pale stone. We wander and observe this lovely old city rich in history and beautiful buildings. We look out from the castle perched on its high crag overlooking a leafy park and the city

spreading out around it. We visit the old town and the new town and even go for a tour in an open topped bus, sitting in the open top, hoods up, in spite of the rain. Gosh, we are used to that. It is fun to be amid such elegant civilisation for a time but our hearts yearn for the green beyond and our journey's end. We have our new maps and have posted off the old and are ready.

The day ends comfortably as a repeat of yesterday's feast and tomorrow we will be refreshed to journey again for the end draws closer. I am both afraid and excited to meet it.

Day 71 Edinburgh to North Queensferry

After two days rest it is difficult to get going again. What a long walk out of Edinburgh and how hard on the feet are its pavements. For hours we weave our way towards the shoreline of the Firth of Forth and eventually meet the shore path. This we follow through a large, tree edged park which stretches ahead lining the choppy grey waters of the Firth with a friendly strip of green. Local residents walk their dogs and say a amiable "hello" as we pass. The breeze is thin and chilly and the sky frowns down at us, threatening rain - again! So where is summer hiding? Still it won't come out.

The River Almond cuts across our path and spreads out into the Firth. A lovely little pub is placed in the shadow of a hill beside the river. Through its open door we can see the kitchen and laid out on the table are large fruit pies wafting a delicious aroma into the air and our noses. There is no bridge to cross the river but a whistle and a wave brings the foot ferry to our shore. A ruddy faced man with a solid brown body rows the tiny rowboat with his strong brown arms and as the oars cut the water the gliding swans slide away to dip their heads between a small collection of colourful boats rocking gently with the tide.

We step gingerly down the mossy steps and lift ourselves into the boat. "Be careful" Philip warns. I have visions of myself tipping into the river and being pulled under the glassy green water of unknown depth by my heavy pack. No such disaster. 90 seconds later we are hauling ourselves up a metal ladder on the other side, me thinking how strong I have become. My pack is no bother. We walk by a tiny stone cottage to a gate in a hedge and then enter a delightful world. A narrow soft earthed path winds ahead of us following the line of the water, through gentle broad leaved woods, its edges lined with flowers. Large trees drip rain water and stretches of sandy beaches flanked by tall beige grasses break the green walk. The choppy surface of the water is slate grey and visibility poor in the misty, drippy air. It is irritating to look around because the rain beats at my face and runs over my eyebrows into my eyes. This in spite of a well designed hood with a peak at the front.

I walk behind Philip, for the path is narrow and overhung with greenery. He is quiet. His feet are painful in his new boots and the hard footpaths of Edinburgh town have exacerbated the problem. This makes him draw into himself for he is not apt to complain.

I feel sympathy for his head is hanging forward into his chest, his shoulders following it and his back looks sad.

We skirt a large golf course, part of the estate we walk through and admire the stately home which sits behind the course framed by beautiful trees. Scotland has a lot more trees than England. I didn't really expect this.

Look ahead, brave the weather for there is a castle standing oh so strongly right on the water's edge, its grey stone blending perfectly with the grey waters at its feet. Who lives there I wonder for the windows have rather incongruous patterned cotton curtains. This is delightful walking in spite of the intermittent sweeps of rain.

When we reach Queensferry, a very attractive winding olden village beneath the shadow of the two bridges, we search in vain for accommodation. The rain has set in and the area is too built up to consider camping. Tar and cement and buildings all around. "I'm really too tired to go on. It's these boots, my feet feel like soup, they have turned to mush" Philip says, his face downcast. This is a difficult day as it is usually Philip who is the strong one, the one to urge us along and joke to improve any negative feelings about the walk. Today though I must take that role, I must be tough and do all the encouraging. So it is decided that we have no choice, we have to cross the bridge. We need somewhere dry.

The Forth Railway Bridge and the Forth Road Bridge arch side by side across the wide and choppy waters of the Firth of Forth.

The Forth Railway Bridge was opened in 1890 and was the biggest manmade construction of its time and also the first bridge to be constructed purely of steel. 5,000 workers were involved in building this spectacular structure.

Many legends are attached to the bridge. It is said that the painting of the bridge is a continuous task – when the job is completed it is time to start again at the beginning. Another legend tells of a single mysterious golden rivet used amongst the 6.5 million ordinary rivets on the bridge. It is rumoured that this has been removed to stop foolhardy individuals looking for it.

Forth Road Bridge was opened on 4th September, 1964 by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and at the time was the largest suspension bridge in Europe. Including the approach viaducts it is over 1 ½ miles in length. The bridge has a spectacular central span over 3300ft between its two main towers. This world famous structure has elegance as well as strength.

The old tawny red Forth Railway Bridge dips and arches its way across the vast waters of the Firth looking like a big dipper ride at an amusement park. A hill is climbed to reach the starkly contrasting concrete and steel construction of the new road bridge which will take us to the other side. Rain is pelting us as we progress across the bridge. Closer to the middle the winds grow stronger and stronger until we can barely walk before them. Philip has no time to consider any foot pain, he must concentrate on fighting the wind and rain. Some more time and we can look down to see North Queensferry beneath us sitting tidily on the shoreline. We walk past the pub. Philip is really dragging his feet, he has walked too far in his new boots. Behind the pub, through the rain I spot a black and white hand written sign "B & B". "Cross our fingers, Philip" I say "let's hope it's not full".

He is hoping very much, I can see it in his face. We knock. Jean opens the door and instead of looking horror struck at the two drenched and half drowned beings before her she booms "my Lord, come in and take those coats and shoes off. Dearie, dearie, my loves you are soaked through. Would you like a cup of tea? Here let me put your coats on the radiator. Well now, what do you think of our summer?" I think we are smiling a lot.

The pub awaits and is crowded with the loyal Scots, kilted and ready to cheer their team in its first World Cup match against Brazil. They stand shoulder to shoulder, beers in hands, facing a large screen on the wall by the bar. The atmosphere is electric, voices raised with excitement and feelings flashing and buzzing in the air. At any hint of success in the game, the room is a sea of wide open mouths shouting and cheering from enthusiastic and animated reddened faces. Clenched fists at the end of straight arms rise like a Hitler salute and bodies leap in unison. Things are not going well and backs become stiff and mouths form a straight line. Each spectator is a mirror of the others in his body language and action. There are heavy groans and loud expletives at half time. The Landlord serves free sausage rolls and they are rapidly consumed. I am sitting in the corner at a small table by the window, observing. Philip mostly stands so he can see the screen. Scotland loses. For these loyal supporters the outcome is soul destroying and they feel real pain, their faces as white and pinched as if there had been a death in the family. It is more than disappointment that forms the hardened mask of their faces. All this however does not diminish their pride in their country and their team and they are self-righteously committed to that team in France. While there is still a chance in the next match there is no shame in not winning this match.

After the match, we go to another pub and sit and eat a meal by the soft glow of candles. A romantic dinner for two, beautiful food and a bottle of wine. Let it rain, we are warm and dry. "This is great Philip" I say. "You deserve it" he replies "you are doing so well". Is he surprised. No, just pleased for his dream is within his reach.

Day 72 North Queensferry to Kinross

A day of many changes of clothes. Sun, cold, warmth, rain. However, we have miles to walk. Road walking today, over the hills and far away.

So we hit the tarmac anxious now to chew up the miles and reach the end. Our bodies are tired, our minds too and we seek the shortest route. The weather is depressing, cold and wet. By afternoon the showers clear and the sun shows its face. It is a somewhat taunting face, one that is enjoying its game with the dark clouds of the skies. We stop for all our breaks - coffee, afternoon tea and lunch, but mostly we walk and we walk. The road reaches ahead into the distance and the fields run away from it rising and falling over the low green hills.

Around 10am we stop for a pint of orange squash in a shabby pub which is directly on our route. Inside the light is dim and the furniture dark. We sit feeling a little

uncomfortable and drinking our drink. "This is a bit of a rough pub" Philip comments. There are only a few others, men, in the pub, and even at this early hour they are drinking beer and spirits. The door swings open and a tall skinny fellow in a dishevelled state stumbles in. As his face comes into focus we see it is covered in blood. He spots us and decides to sit at our table. Oh dear. Philip nudges me under the table warning me to follow his lead in being friendly and pleasant. The blood drips from his broken, twisted nose and every now and then he lifts a limp hand and wipes more of it across his face. He downs a beer followed by a glass of scotch. Full of talk and still drunk from the wake after Scotland's defeat in the soccer last night, he is friendly to us in spite of his appearance. Philip suggests he gets his nose attended to and with that little bit of interest we are suddenly his best friends. He wants us to stay at his house with him. He presses his keys onto us but Philip shrugs them away, saying a smiling "thank you" but we must be going as we have a commitment further along the road. He becomes a little aggressive and the men at the other table stroll over taking control and allow us the space to make our escape. I feel sad for these men who seem to enjoy more than a casual drink. Perhaps they should take up walking in the hills for leisure instead pursuing this slow and numbing death. It would make them feel good about themselves and then they would gain more appreciation of the world about them. Even in the rain Britain has an ethereal beauty.

Finally we reach the town of Kinross in Kinross-shire, an area rich in history and natural beauty. Thousands of Pink Footed Geese winter here every year and William Wallace and Robert the Bruce had associations with the area. Attached to the town cross are the old "jougs" or iron collars which once imprisoned wrong-doers in the sight of all. Here is a haven for anglers for here the salmon jump but for us Kinross means rest.

The campsite is at "The Services" by the motorway so we cross the bridge and go in only to find that the campsite no longer exists. A relief really, we would not wish to camp amid this transient lot of people. The Manager is very apologetic for he sees we are walking and so he drives us to a new campsite on the other side of town. It is pleasant and on farmland. The Scottish camp manager congratulates us on getting over the worst part of our journey - that was England!!! He doesn't know that is a much heard cliché in these parts.

Looking out over the fields to the mountains, dark thunderheads are gathering and lightening forks and flashes in their depths as though encouraging the storm to spread out and engulf the world. A gentle rumbling shifts through the air and we hasten to put our tent up. This night we are too tired to eat and although it is early afternoon we lay on sleeping bags and wait the storm. Soon it comes with hail and sweeping rain pounding on our tent but we are asleep before it is over.

Day 73
Kinross to Perth

We wake to the first glimmerings of dawn blooming rose in a pale sky. The summer nights are short, barely existing in the long days but we are refreshed and cook our breakfast leaving long before the first stirrings of our fellow campers.

Not a cloud in the sky. Seems impossible. The distances are filled with the high rise of dark mysterious Scottish mountains and the space between is green and golden, soft and full of beautiful trees.

We walk out of Kinross from our exact footsteps of yesterday leaving tarmac to the cars to follow old green roads, many now indistinct on the weather ravaged land. As we reach the edge of the town an old man leans over his front wall, stopping us we think to chat but relates a very lewd joke in a loud slavering voice, his spit spraying through wide gaps in his teeth. He laughs enough for us all. Bit of an old pervert we think.

The road turns to a lane and the lane turns to a track. The hills are large green mounds, improbable in their shape and they seem at times to move but on closer inspection we see they are seething with rabbits darting in profusion amongst the yellow gorse. "This land wouldn't be worth much" Philip comments "it must be like honeycomb". At Glen Farg, a small piece of water reflecting the world above and about it, we feel a great sense of well being as we gaze at the cool blue water dazzling in the sun under the azure sky painted on its edges with long strips of stretchy clouds pulled thin by a high sky wind. We pass a group of buildings which are a fishing retreat and head downhill to find the green road between the fields, marked only by the tumbling stone walls that line its sides.

This we follow, soft grasses folding beneath our footfall as our legs stretch out through the golden day and we breathe deeply of the fresh clear air. The woe begones of yesterday have disappeared and our spirits are light and we feel good and strong. Philip's feet feel much better. They have been hardened by the months of walking and have already begun to adapt to his new boots. Philip leans towards me and rests his arm on my shoulders in the space between me and my pack. He smiles but we are silent because it is enough to be here together and words are not necessary, the eyes are enough. I think "how happy we are".

A loch comes into view and we skirt its tree lined edge along a farm lane by thick woodland up along its winding way to a hill which holds the ruin of what must have once been an imposing and beautiful farmhouse. The feature stonework and carvings are exquisite and a magnificent fireplace stands open to the elements in a half crumbled wall. Ruinous outbuildings surround it and the scene is poignant in its incompleteness. The soft wind whispers of happier days and tosses in the air the fragments of lives that cannot be relived. A million stories, most of them lost forever. As we gain the hill behind, the path becomes more indistinct and we are unsure of our direction.

Philip consults map and compass and we find the old road again hidden, but heading up the hill, in a fenced strip between two narrow fields and planted with trees under which grows a thicket of nettles. Arduous walking up this hill and when we reach the top we climb a high and rickety stile. I go first, very carefully because the wood looks eaten and weak. Philip climbs with his usual certainty but is distracted and loses his balance. He lands feet first creating a large splash in an ooze of mud and green dung. He is angry and thinks he smells disgusting. "Look at this bloody mess" he shouts "why didn't you help me down, now I stink of cow shit". "Whoops" I say "are you hurt" "No" comes the gruff reply. I sniff him. "You don't smell, anyway you'll dry in the sun or the rain will wash you" I say. He gives a grumph. No good worrying about what you can't change. We need our energy in our legs. This I don't say. I only think it for no-one likes a know-all. We move on.

Thousands of flies buzz at our feet intent on breeding in the ooze of dung we wade through but soon we are again on a uphill lane in a tunnel of trees walking through beautiful Perthshire. We pass a bull. He is pale cream with touches of black and seems the size of a hippopotamus. He uses his massive weight to worry at the fence that contains him. Wet and angry snorts shout from his crimson mouth and he stamps his great cloven feet, tossing his head, eager for some sport with us. We have in the last week heard two tales of cattle. The first was one of these bulls that killed an electricity worker about 10 days ago. It broke down the fence and gored him to death. The second was a woman who, about a week ago, took her dogs walking in the fields. The cows in the field had several calves and her dogs began to harass them. The cows became annoyed and attacked the dogs. The woman raced to intervene but was also overpowered and killed, by cows!!! Dear oh dear. How did they kill her? Seems absurd. Did they fall on her or bump her between them. Could it have been a real story or just a new myth. I don't know. Well, neither this bull nor the steep hills nor dirty clothes can quell our good humour today and we stride on. We stop in a small wooden bus shelter to make tea. There is a seat in there. Seats are rather special. They become somewhat of a novelty.

Huge trees with lofty branches of rustling leaves form an avenue of beauty and we walk in their dappled shade to the city of Perth.

Lovely Perth on the River Tay described by Sir Walter Scott as "the most varied and beautiful" in Scotland and by many others it is described as "the Fair City". It has a compact city centre, a traffic free High Street and many of the streets have rows of elegant Georgian terraced houses. There is a definite air of prosperity in this small but busy market town. The campsite is on the side of town we enter from and we are placed in a corner by the hedge as the area is full of weekend campers. The 'season' has begun. We catch a bus into the High Street and are enchanted by the architecture of the houses and the many beautiful trees and delightful gardens adding to the grandeur. Shopping and dinner and then back on the bus and a short walk in the long twilight to our rest.

From left to right.

Dry Valley above Malham Cove, Yorkshire Dales

Border fence

The drama of High Cup Nick, Pennine Way

The River Tees



Day 74 Perth to Dunkeld

A change of plan to lessen our journey by a day. We yearn now for the end. Instead of going through Glen Shee to Aberfeldy, we will head due north on a cycle trail to Dunkeld. The forecast is for rain, but the day stays blue.

Our walk out of Perth takes us through some housing estates. A man pulls up in a car assuming we are lost and offers us a lift. We pass the time of day with him and he is astounded by our journey and thinks it amusing to see two backpackers wandering amongst this suburban community. A short stint along the main road and then we are in the countryside again and soon enter the village of Almondbank. Bread rolls are needed and we come to a village shop. A round and jolly man, also a customer, strikes up a conversation with us.

By the time we reach the village green we are hungry. The large square of grass is surrounded on all sides by imposing stone houses and the green almost assumes the proportions of a small park. Gigantic trees grow here and there and we stop in the shade of one of these to sit on a bench and boil up our coffee. Glancing up we see the round man from the shop striding purposefully towards us with a number of folders tucked under his arm. "I live over there on the edge of the green and I saw you sitting there" he says "I was going to ask you over for coffee". He is disappointed to see us sipping our coffee but just in case we had started he thought to bring his folders with him. And so..... we are treated to a pictorial history of his military life, his days in the police force, his career as an estate agent and many shots of his house and garden. Luckily we did not go to his house as we may have been there for a long long time. What a funny and interesting man.

Another man appears on the scene and he knows all about us. News travels fast around here and who else is going to come out we wonder. Philip says "the doors will open one after the other and the people will all come across the green to meet us. The message will travel from house to house - there are strangers in the park". A shake of the head to dispel these thoughts and a smile and a goodbye for our new friends, we have miles to walk and we must be gone.

So it is up the tiny lanes once again to weave our way across the countryside to the lovely town of Dunkeld which lies beside the River Tay, Scotland's longest river, surrounded by treed hills and crags. On the west bank of the River Tay is situated Birnam where the Birnam Oak is a fragment of the ancient forest described in Shakespeare's Macbeth. The mountains are slowly rising higher out of the hills before us. Green is everywhere and the majestic trees grow in great profusion. Dunkeld is an illustration from a fairytale book with its grey stone 17th century buildings, many with turrets and high steep rooves. After the Battle of Killiecrankie in 1689 the Jacobites attacked Dunkeld. The battle destroyed most of the town and the buildings here today were built after this event.

Signs point to the river and the campsite and as the day is warm we buy ice creams and sit a while in the sunshine until the chill rises from the earth and the shadows bring the cool dampness of evening. Then to tent, to sleep, to dream. Oh the luxury of lying flat, our bodies at rest and our minds drifting, lulled by the song of the river beside us, dancing over smooth stones as it has since time began.

Day 75 Dunkeld to Pitlochry

It seems the sun shines and the birds sing all night but somewhere there whilst I slumber the hours of darkness must come and night sheds its mantle over the earth. When though is a mystery as no matter what time I wake it seems to be light.

Up again well before our fellow campers, into the shower and onto the road before they show their sleepy faces. The bark of a dog marks our passing and then all is quiet. Our feet tread the earth by the racing river and we feel good. We scramble up the bank to the A road which by necessity we follow out of the town to a quiet B road signposted Aberfeldy. The scenery is getting more mountainous as we go. A vast field dotted with sheep and trees of green and russet contrasts with the dark purple and deep green of the mountains beyond. Those mountains are where we are headed. Road walking is hard on the feet, but these lanes make for fast progress.

We pass the quintessential Scottish walker today. Hair long and of fiery red blending into a beard of the same colour but curly and frothy at the end of his face. Bright blue eyes look loudly from the creased lines of his ruddy countenance. He wears comfortable clothes of soft greens and browns and carries a strong straight staff. His dog, a border collie, pads faithfully at his side. No sign of tartan, but no need to show colours, he is plainly a Scotsman, through and through. He gives us a cheery greeting but his accent is thick and we can only distinguish his words by the lilt of his voice. I would love to take a photograph of him but Philip says it would be impolite.

We cross a disused railway bridge, stepping carefully to avoid the gaps and loose planks, and testing our weight before stepping on the apparently sound boards, to a pub where we think we will treat ourselves to lunch but the bread is stale and the filling sparse. Hunger pangs are not quelled so we drink our pint of squash and go on again munching chocolate along another quiet tree lined lane over hills to Pitlochry. Yellow gorse and broom, daisies, pine forests, beautiful broadleaved trees and high hills. The sun shines but the air is cold and it will be camping again tonight. As we round a corner approaching from the south we see a castle, the Atholl Palace Hydro, with its white turrets, sitting high on a hill framed in trees and overlooking the Victorian grey stone town of Pitlochry. Pitlochry, a dignified, solid Victorian spa town of stone buildings, is the centre of the Highlands, a popular holiday resort and is set amid some magnificent scenery. The town has some elegant buildings and hotels and bed and breakfast establishments are everywhere.

It is quite early in the day and after we put the tent up we rest. We walk the miles so quickly now.

Looking forward to a hot meal we walk a mile into the centre of the town to a restaurant. The restaurant is out of just about everything. Each time we choose a meal the boy waiter has to come back from the kitchen and tell us "all gone, sorry". The final time he comes back he was gone many a tummy rumble for he was pacing the kitchen trying to summon up the courage to tell us more bad news. Dear me, poor boy. So we leave the restaurant rather disappointed and settle for fish and chips on a park bench followed by a huge ice cream sundae and a big pot of tea in a coffee shop. The evening is turning cold and a sharp wind makes us hunch our shoulders and draw closer to each other as we walk back to our tent to find rest and comfort. So tired, just so so tired. I have never imagined that I could feel this tired.

Day 76 Pitlochry to Blair Athol

Swish, flap, swish "uh huh, it's raining again" sings Philip. Steel skies hanging low and the rain washes the land. Today is a short day - only 8 miles so we roll over and snuggle down close together drifting in and out of sleep lulled by the gently steady thrum of the rain.

After a time a quietness settles. We listen. I peep out the tent flap "it's stopped Philip" I say. We rush to pack up all our gear before the rain begins again. We need to walk through Pitlochry again. Such an interesting town, so comfortable and neat with lovely stone houses with gables and turrets. A town of many tales, dreams and great adventures I am sure. A place where Victorian families came for holidays to take the air and be terribly civilised. We will come back here one day for it has a great feel and bears closer investigation. We will come in the winter I think when the grey stone is dusted with white and the days are short and the fires roar.

The boat house rests comfortably by the river and here we find a most enchanting and beautiful riverside walk to Killiecrankie. Oh it is such a delight, even on this softly damp day. As usual we have it all to ourselves. The path is spongy underfoot, strewn and brown with pine needles. Trees wood the steep sides of the River Gary which has been dammed and turned into a loch. The deep still waters sparkle with raindrops marring reflections in the muted light. The path winds along the waters edge at first even and wide then turning narrow and steep and at times difficult to negotiate as our feet slide on the low muddy slopes. The loch turns to a languid river, its sometimes swampy edges home to swathes of yellow irises. I love this walk. Art students have placed their three dimensional works in improbable places through the woods and each time we stumble on one we are surprised and laugh with delight. The rain does not diminish but neither does our enjoyment.

Philip's spirits are high today and his feet are fine. We relax to the steady beat of our stride.

The fabulous drama of the Pass of Killiecrankie awaits us, its narrow densely wooded gorge holding the River Garry is very impressive when viewed from high span of the bridge. Killiecrankie is very famous in Scottish history. A renowned battle was fought here in 1689 between the forces of William of Orange, who landed on the shores of England and King James II who he ousted from the dual thrones of England and Scotland. The Scottish Highland Clans were sympathetic to their former King and formed the Jacobite revolution. (Jacobas being Latin for James).

This is a National Trust area with a Visitors' Centre and has many paths which beckon and invite exploration but our road lies to the north and we are fast approaching our journey's end. So we walk on. At Soldier's Leap we debate the real possibility of the proclaimed feat of a redcoat soldier jumping 18' across the foaming cataract between two fearsome rocks when pursued by a Jacobite clansman. I am not sure if this is possible, especially when you consider how short the people were in those days. We sit for a while uphill from the path, amid the large roots of a lovely old tree and make coffee. It is still very cold, damp and misty. Quite wintry and we yearn for some warmth. We have had so few sunny days, each has been like a golden treasure. At the visitors centre we encounter our first swarm of midges. They seem to be everywhere, in your eyes, in your hair, ears and mouth. They are minuscule and in the damp air they make your skin itch.

We phone and book a B & B for tonight. We have already stocked up on provisions for our 3 day journey through the mountains. Tonight we will be comfortable and eat and sleep well for the next three days will find us in the wilderness.

Day 77 Blair Athol to Brynack Lodge

The new day is grey. We try hard to keep our spirits up but nature seems to search us out and rain on us. Forlornly our eyes search the sombre expanse of cloud for a hint of blue but there is none. Breakfast is by a large bay window in a cosy room from where we can view the soft drizzle and the wishy washy misty clouds sitting heavily on the mountain tops. Disappointment shades our optimism and leaves us feeling flat. Nothing for it though - three days walking through the mountains to Aviemore and no turning back. I feel a slight apprehension at the thought of walking into the isolated unknown with mist on the mountains but our first day's walking will take us up Glen Tilt and the way should be clear to follow along the path of the river.

So packs on and off we go and unbeknown to me this will prove to be the most beautiful day of our entire walking experience. Expect the unexpected for this will be a wonder.

The road out of Blair Athol conveys no traffic this morning and by the time we have walked the mile or two to our track the rain has stopped and the day is looking brighter. Our spirits lift and our feet step lightly on their path. Broad smiles crease our faces as we look ahead into the woods and feel the mystery of the way we have chosen. The track is

wide and good at this stage and the soft foliage glistens and drips in the half sunlight as our way dips down to meet an old stone bridge spanning the River Tilt. The river is fairly wide and fast as it skims along over its sometimes stony bed, at times foaming and frothing in small waterfalls around the large boulders that rise above its surface. Further down it is deeper and quieter and draws reflections from the soft light. The water appears clean and crystal cold. "There will be no shortage of water on this little trek" I call to Philip who is slightly ahead and lost in the beauty of his surroundings.

As we climb the hill on the far side of the river, the track leads between a rising and falling wood of small conifers. A red squirrel darts across the track and climbs helter skelter into the trees. An hour or so of walking brings us to a larger vista of diminishing trees and high green mountains rising sharply from the river, the mountains stand one behind the other as though jostling for positions. Small trees grow horizontally on the river bank and it is all glorious. Everywhere is fresh and green. A postman passes us in a red four-wheel drive and dogs and a landowner come out of a stone cottage to greet him. The track winds on and diminishes in width and the scenery gets better. The river curls its silver dazzling way between rising green and heather brown mountains. This is an intense world. It is real and colourful, it is challenging and soothing. Here is drama and splendour with fear and foreboding, walking hand in hand with beauty.

A happy waterfall burbles and bounces its way down the hillside to disappear into a burn beneath a bridge and down into the river. We sit here and make our morning coffee feeling full of reverence. A stout and smiling fisherman in green wellies and jacket strolls up from the river with his coffee and joins us. We chat about salmon and the pleasures of sitting alone with your thoughts in this inspiring place. It is not the fish that draw him here again and again he tells us, it is the solitary joy, for he rarely catches a fish - he just lets his thoughts flow with the waters before him and feels glad of the world. This is as far as he can go up the River Tilt in his vehicle as here at this tiny bridge the 4-wheel drive track ends and the way becomes narrow and at times indistinct on the grassy riverside.

We walk on and the sun comes out. The light is liquid spilling over the mountains and staining the colours deep. What a feeling, walking all alone, we two through this majestic place. Eventually the track narrows and leaves the river turning left around the darkly heathered mountainside into a steep narrow valley of a width only sufficient to carry a small and racing burn. I find this threatening and unwelcoming but soon we turn again and ahead creating a dramatic backdrop to a wide prehistoric valley riddled with winding and interlacing rivers are the snow topped Cairngorms. Philip consults the map and says "when we are opposite the fourth mountain on our right we will have reached the ruin of Brynack Lodge." The ground is wet and deeply soggy underfoot but we plod on wondering what it will be like at Brynack Lodge, our proposed campsite. We follow one of the burns and ahead on a rise of green cropped grass are the grey and tumbling ruins of Brynack Lodge. A few small outcrops of scraggily trees stand looking decidedly weatherworn on the green and there are five tiny bright tents dotted about them. Small dark figures are hanging clothes and sleeping bags on rope lines, to flap in the wind.

The sun is still shining when we begin to greet our fellow campers, five ex soldiers who have been walking the mountaintops for the past week. Everything they had brought with them is drenched. I am looking forward to sitting with them in the long evening amid the mountains and learning of their lives. However, true to form, as soon as we start putting up the tent the wind changes direction and dark threatening clouds begin to fly in at supersonic speed over the mountain tops. Nature says "you've had enough sun today, now cop this!!". So, no possibility of eating outdoors. We throw everything inside the tent and my feet are only just through the flap when the hailstorm hits and our tent shifts and flaps beneath its onslaught. The temperature instantly plummets and now it is freezing so it is in to our sleeping bags wearing all our clothes to eat a cold meal of cracker biscuits and the ever faithful peanut butter, and then sleep.....so tired, so very tired.

Day 78 Brynack Lodge to Mountain Bothy

Never in our lives has there been such a glorious awakening to a new day. Nature I am in your thrall. It is early, very early. In fact the nights are fleeting in the long sunlit days and this new day so close to the old, is amazing. We are first up among the campers. The sky is huge and high, a great stretch of the softest blue tinged with the palest pink. The dark silhouettes of the mountains striding across the land rise into it slowly gaining colour as the first bright sparkles of the sun's rays shoot above the mountain top. My heart leaps as I gaze out over far distant valley and watch as it comes to life in the new day. Brynack Burn winds out into the valley marked mostly by its wide tumble of grey stones, its clear fast waters at times not clearly apparent in the distance, but here close at hand they are cold and travel with much sound as well as movement. At the further end of the valley at the hem of the mountains lies a dark forest, looking like an immense flat black rock in the distance.

Time for breakfast and the gathering of water. The others are up now and they too love the day. Their leader, a strapping pink skinned man is naked, fortunately with his back to me, in the freezing burn, splashing water over his quickly reddening, soon purple body. I smile. He is showing the others how it is done. A smaller, tubby and kindly man sees my smile and raises his eyebrows. "He has driven us to the edge of our endurance" he says. He tells me of their days high on the mountains in snow, rain and mist and I tell him of our journey. I am a long time gathering water.

Philip also chats with the ex-soldiers and gains some valuable information. We had planned to make the high and famous Llaire Ghru crossing of the Cairngorms but they warn us against going that way. It took them 9 hours to walk 5 miles in atrocious conditions through a heavy mist. The path was non-existent in places and large boulders had tumbled down the mountainside around them. He also told Philip that not long ago a father and his young son died up there from exposure. The Llaire Ghru is a long and strenuous mountain walk through the heart of Britain's highest mountains. The path is very exposed and little or no shelter is available. We are told that the bothy en route is

unavailable and in need of repair. The north / south alignment of the pass funnels and accelerates wind and with the recent snow and possible threat of more and the definite warning of heavy mist, we decide to reconsider our options. We study the map and decide to walk to Aviemore through Glen Feshie, slightly longer it seems but definitely safer. So, we eat our scrambled eggs and bread, pack up and say farewell to the men and wish them luck. My water collecting friend rolls his eyes. I smile.

The walking is easy through the valley but necessitates crossing several small burns on slippery stones.

Eventually we come to the point where we need to cross the Geldie Burn and follow it to the left up through Glen Feshie. It is wide and knee deep with a fast flow. The amazing thing is that someone has left pairs of shoes on the bank. So we take off our boots and socks, roll our trousers high and put on the shoes. The water is cold beyond imagining and in the minute or two it takes us to wade through, our skin turns purple. I again smile as I think of the soldier this morning. "No wonder he kept his back to me!" I say to Philip. He feigns shock "Marilyn!!" he says. We leave the shoes for someone to walk back, put our dry ones on and head into another valley.

A different scene.

Glen Feshie is a u-shaped glacial valley which lies in peace far from civilisation between the granite masses of the Cairngorms.

Heather clad mountains rise around us and the burn twists along at our side. We lose the path on the tall squelchy hills but follow the compass and manage to find the 'one person at a time' bridge which crosses high and precariously above a rocky gorge. "Cross at your own risk" warns the sign. We cross and have our morning tea on the far side perched on a rocky crag close to the edge of the chasm. It is a wild and dangerous place but exciting in a way that makes you draw breath.

At lunch time we laze in the sunshine on a grassy patch by a bright and bubbling burn which tumbles its rocky way down into the widening River Feshie. This is the life. What a wonderful way to spend our days, wandering free and unfettered in the wilds of Scotland. We are so tough now and although we still get very tired, our legs eat up the miles and we are easily doing double what we did in the first days of our journey. There is no rush though, no stress or targets to our days, we plan as we go and enjoy what is around us. Is this a postponement of life I wonder again. Is this a dream.

A mile or two beyond the Burn the path again turns into a 4-wheel drive track although it is deeply rutted and difficult to walk on. I think it will be easy and direct walking from here. How wrong can you be, it is always a mistake to allow your thoughts to take straight lines. What is it that they say about assumption?

We walk on a track above the river along the mountainside. Great escarpments rise about us and the track has fallen away completely. There must have been a huge avalanche or

landslide here and the wide and deep gauge in the mountainside is far too dangerous to cross. So it is back down to the River Feshie only to find that it snakes and curls its way right to the edge of the mountainside and there is no way around its banks, the only way is to cross the river. We look forlornly at its broad and crystal waters of unclear depth. The flow is fast, at times furious, still in spate from the snowfall of the previous week. For over an hour we walk the river bank trying to find the best place to cross. Eventually I get fed up "let's just do it" I say. This is where we should have a rope so each could cross separately tied to the other on the bank. Didn't bring a rope though. We will keep our boots on as the stones will be slippery. Philip goes ahead and I follow. The other bank is several metres away and the water grows deeper as we go reaching our waists. I am very afraid. I keep my walking stick firmly in the stony bed, my hands freezing in the water, trying to keep my balance in the racing river.

I look to my right and there, down a bit, the gravel glacial deposits which form the bed of the river appear smaller and the river looks more shallow. So I move there the flow of the water taking me further than anticipated. Big mistake, the water is much deeper and is swirling around above my waist. I panic and freeze as the river froths and flies around my body and the current tugs so very strongly at my feet and legs. It wants to wash me away, swallow me into the torrents of its tide. By this time Philip is on the other side, very concerned. He calls "Come on, just keep going. You'll be fine. Go slowly, but keep going". I can tell he is trying to keep his voice calm so as not to cause me to panic. This makes me think outside my situation. My lungs inhale deeply and with great resolution I blank my mind to fear and step slowly forward using my stick beneath the water for support. I am too afraid to notice the icy cold of the river. All I can say is I must be a much stronger version of myself for I make it and then drenched and freezing, promptly burst into tears. "You did well there" Philip says "it could be been a disaster but why did you go down there, I said to follow me?". I say nothing for I am too shaken up. We have another crossing to make where the river snakes around the far side of the island we now find ourselves on. This is far easier as the water is only thigh deep. We change our socks and I change my trousers and try and rub some of the wetness from the rest of our clothes and walk on. I am silent for a time, gathering my thoughts but the spirit of the land is strong and it is difficult to be melancholy for long. Philip smiles and takes my hand. "That was a close one" he says. Soon we have dried out a bit and are chatting happily leaving that near tragedy behind us. I have learnt a lesson though.

Grey clouds begin to build behind the mountains, auguring rain and ahead through the trees we see the small grey stone form of the mountain bothy. Mountain bothies are maintained by the Mountain Bothies Association for the shelter of walkers in the Scottish highlands. It is a neat stone house with two rooms, a fireplace and a loft that would sleep a number of people and is reached by a ladder. No one here but us, we have it all to ourselves. We change our clothes and hang up our wet things then make a hot meal to warm us. We sit on rough wooden stools sipping our tea and talking of the day. The smell of charcoal and old boots has permeated the timbers of the room and newspapers with half finished crosswords lie on a bench. A few emergency supplies, powdered milk, tins of food and coffee, occupy a shelf. The fireplace is empty and cold. Around us are stale echoes of friendly conversations, the shuffle of a pack of cards and the stretch and groan

of tired bodies. No-one else comes, these are the sounds of nights past. We grow sleepy. The shadows lean in from the edges of the room heralding the closing day and the silence follows them. "Bed" says Philip ... so up the ladder we climb. Tonight we will sleep close.

Day 79 Mountain Bothy to Aviemore

My eyes open to the muted light and complete silence of the bothy loft. The small skylight in the roof shows blue. A good day, hopefully also a good track to follow.

We step out across the flat, narrow, grassy valley and walk between the abundant trees towards the river. The day is still new and after a brisk even walk following the river we reach a rickety and unstable looking bridge which spans the fast flowing waters of the River Feshie. "Danger, bridge unsafe, cross at own risk" reads the sign. We cross one at a time and step carefully over the undulating and sometimes sparse and broken planks. The bridge creaks and groans under our weight. We are coming back to civilisation and from here on the walking is easy along well defined lanes still at the side of the river.

After some uneventful time we come to a farm and the path ends. It should go directly through the farm but the way is heavily barricaded with barbed wire and rope. Well now he doesn't expect us to walk all the way back and find a different route, does he? We have the river on our left and hills on our right and after all there is a 'right of way' here. So we defy this landowner's attempt to keep us out and take our packs off and toss them over the fence. One at a time we climb delicately over the top of the spiky blockade. Looks as though he is trying to keep out the German army, not a couple of harmless walkers. It is still well before breakfast time and all is quiet as we tread carefully through a messy paddock to a padlocked gate. Old tools and tyres, roughed up ground and a general sense of disorder pervades. We glance up at the blank windows of the tall staid stone house fearing a Scottish spying eye but no-one appears. The whole place has an air of being deserted. Maybe there is a hermit, an anti social soul, inside. Our concentration tunes to leaving this place and up and over the gate we go then onto another lane through some heathered moorland to a forest of verdant trees and rushing burns. The lane stretches out towards Aviemore and the day is growing older and warmer so we change to shorts. We just stop by the roadside and change. So bold. As wanderers and strangers we sometimes feel invisible. Walking from here to the end will now be mostly via tarmac. Coffee is by a bubbling burn in the shade of a summer woodland. Singing birds and singing waters, sunny skies in the forever blue. It is so good to be alive.

Philip can't sit comfortably now for the bones in his bottom dig into him. His bottom has almost disappeared. Where has it gone?

We are both keen to reach Aviemore but find the town itself most unappealing. A long string of ugly modern buildings and hotels, shops, superstores and arcades fronting the road and the town show no hint of planning but the scene is relieved by a few interesting houses and hotels. Concrete is the favoured building material, particularly of the

unattractive complex called The Aviemore Shopping Centre and style seems to have been forgotten. All very 60's I think. Shame, shame. Aviemore is the centre serving the winter ski resort of the Cairngorms and of course many walkers come here as a base for ventures into the mountains.

Luckily though we find a lovely old guest house with a huge bath. Three days without a wash and the bath is wonderful- so deep and warm and relaxing. Every bit of dirt and weariness goes down the drain with the water and then it is Philip's turn. We will sleep well tonight.

Day 80 Aviemore to Tomatin

It is a relief to leave Aviemore but our initial exit is along a busy road and as we walk on the narrow verge we are quite fearful of the roaring traffic. The day is humid with a low sky and soon it begins to drizzle. Waterproofs on, jackets on only to swelter and sweat beneath them. I opt for just getting damp.

A couple of hours into the day we leave the busy road for one of General Wade's old military roads. General Wade built over 1,000 miles of roads in the 1700's for rapid deployment of troops through the highlands to help quell the Jacobite rebellion. Such was the engineering skill that many of them remain today. The road is just a track which winds on through the woods. The rain keeps falling. We have only just congratulated ourselves on how well we are doing when the track turns into a strip of cropped grass and green fields spread out before us between the forested hills. "I think we have taken a wrong turn" I say. "Really!" Philip says with a large dose of sarcasm. I laugh.

We backtrack and find a grassy space behind a gate and between two old drystone walls leading up a hill. In the field beside it a huge and angry bull stamps and snorts. Hastily we climb the gate and walk up the hill fearing the bull will climb the tumbling dyke (wall) and breach the small ditch that is all there is between him and us. General Wade's green road takes us up and down the hills through mostly forested land. We see no-one and wonder if anyone ever comes this way. A small valley of green surrounded by woods opens out before us and the walking is muddy and slow before we reach firm green ground. To our left are the ruins of an old farmhouse and before us spanning a frothing burn is the most improbable bridge I have ever seen. This is Sluggers Bridge and it rises above the burn in an extraordinarily high oval arch and we can only stare in amazement and wonder how it stays up. Its stones are old, very old and the way over the bridge has low walls each side and is carpeted in bright green grass. A small closed gate guards each end. How does the grass on the bridge stay short for the sheep are kept out by the gate?

We cross the bridge and search for our path on the other side. Paths run off in all directions but it is hard to discern whether they are people paths, sheep tracks or deer tracks. There are many many deer in these hills and the stiles we climb are tall over the

high deer gates. We follow the map and have to climb one of these deer gates which is strongly padlocked. All along the path hides stand on tall stilts with small windows like all seeing eyes. Soon we find our way again only to lose it at the edge of the woods beyond yet another deer gate. It just disappears in the overgrown surroundings.

We close the gate behind us with great difficulty as the grasses and mosses have grown up to cover the old path raising the level of the ground. Before us lies a vast swamp with patches of cottony grass and heather but mostly large pools of swamp covered with pink and green moss. Large sighs whoosh from our mouths. This is not going to be fun. As usual though, the only way is forward and the road snakes in the far distance marked by the glint of sun on glass as the cars speed by. We step out heading for the road but it is a long and arduous toil and for me rather frightening as I do not know whether this is the sort of swamp you can sink in or if it is quite safe to slosh through. Carefully, ever so carefully we pick our way across and the distance seems interminable but as we all know, all things come to pass and soon the swampy moor flops happily into that category. Rather messy and grubby we climb the hill and barbed wire fences to the road. The A9.

From here we follow a cycleway, more of the same one we followed near Perth and the walking is good though hard on the feet. We reach Tomatin, home of the largest whisky distillery in Scotland, which produces malt whisky – Tomatin Distillery. Tomatin's history of distilling goes back to the 15th century when the drovers of cattle over the high mountain passes filled up their whisky flasks from a still alongside the Old Laird's House. We settle though for a pint of milk each which we gulp thirstily sitting on the low window ledge in front of the village shop. There is no accommodation to be found and so we knock on a few doors and soon find a friendly farmer who allows us to camp in one of his fields. The field is treeless and is behind the farm house. There is no shelter and nowhere to hide ourselves. It is wide, perfectly flat and finishes abruptly at the edge of a steep hill which falls to the river flatlands below. We are completely on view to the house and garden. The nights are virtually non-existent now and so we are totally without privacy as the family in the house seem never to go to bed and are always outside. We have to cling to the grasses down the side of the hill to prevent a fall whilst going to the toilet. So we discover that our arms are strong as well as our legs.

I feel I have not been drinking enough water today. I am so thirsty all the time and water was not easy to come by. In the night I sometimes waken with a raging thirst and then my legs go into spasm and cramp in a most excruciating way. Thankfully, we are almost there, not much more than a week's walking to go. Philip experiences the same feelings and the tent is jolted and shaken with our untameable legs.



Top:
Glen Tilt, Scotland

Bottom:
Looking out
into the valley
from the ruin
of Brynack
Lodge, Scottish
Glens

Day 81

Tomatin to Inverness

The midges are biting. Tiny minuscule wisps of creatures, barely a speck but they get in your hair, in your ears and in your tea and they make you itch, itch, itch. At dusk and dawn they fog the air in their thousands. Arrrgh!!! These horrid biting midges are small vigorous wee insects with knife-like, sucking mouths and they belong to the family of flies.

Another decision to make. Shall we go over the hills and take two days to reach Inverness or shall we grit our teeth and walk 18 miles along the A9. We are tired. We want to finish now, we just want to get there and so today begins the pattern of what will occupy most of our days between here and John o'Groats. Dreaded road walking. Hard on the feet and sad on the soul.

In view of this, there is not much to say regarding today. It is a route march on the grass verge of the A9 for 18 miles into Inverness. Even our break is synonymous with the pattern of the day – we sit at a laminex table in a road house attached to a service station eating baked beans on toast and drinking pallid tea. We really are lowering our standards. We make good time and reach our destination not long after lunch. Inverness, capital of the Highlands, lies at the north end of the great glen where the River Ness flows into the Moray Firth. The name Inverness is Gaelic for “river mouth of the Ness” and it is a town of ancient origins. We walk into town past elegant Victorian detached houses that are beauty in stone. Much of Inverness we see today dates from the 19th century although its history goes back to its time as the capital of the Pictish Kings in the 400's.

We book into a B&B in a house whose structure of many turrets and corners makes me sigh, and go out sightseeing. Inverness, ringed by mountains to the north, south and west and with Moray Firth to the east is a pleasant place to spend the afternoon strolling and eating for tomorrow we begin the last leg. The end really is in sight now.

Day 82

Inverness to Evanton

It seems to take so long to walk out of this city. At the Kessock Bridge which links Inverness to North Kessock on the Black Isle, the sign tells us it is 120 miles to John o'Groats. This is the first time we see a sign with the words “John o'Groats” on it. We stand before it like two lost travellers. It is a rather profound moment for in reality we do feel lost for the end is not just the realisation of a dream it is also the dispelling of it. “Let's go” says Philip, his voice gruff with emotion.

On the bridge are men and women from the coastguard dressed in yellow waterproof jump suits, peering out over the wide wintry waters. In the pink and grey shadows of dawn a

woman jumped off the bridge. She leapt from life into death. She sped like an arrow or tumbled like a rag doll into the choppy grey waters below and grey desperation became cold death. Shivers down the spine. Now she is cold forever. I wish I could have been there to tell her that tomorrow is a new day. Turns out she was the wife of someone high in the police force – or so the rumour goes. They found her car abandoned in the car park. What led her to this? We will never know.

The wind is trying to knock us flat but we stay upright and soon slip beneath its grip down under the bridge by the shore where it is calm and cool. We follow the shoreline to Charlestown then along lanes through the rolling countryside to Culbokie. Initially we see lots of cars, everyone has a smile and a friendly wave for us. Maybe they know where we are headed.

The day brightens and the sun comes out and it is shorts weather again. Changes by the hour. Happily munching juicy pears we step lightly along the lane, bright summer flowers nod cheerfully at the roadside and cows contentedly graze on green pastures. We stop in a dappled open woodland for morning tea and sit on mossy tree stumps. Philip boils the water for our milky coffee and I mix the coffee, sugar and powdered milk. We eat viennese creams from Marks and Spencers and drink our lovely hot, sweet coffee. Life does not get better than this. Now there is an apt cliché. How different from yesterday. We are tempted to dally here, to put our backs to a tree, stretch our legs and chat, but the road stretches on to our final destination.

Such an idyllic day's walking, quiet lanes, woodlands and soft countryside. A couple on horseback clatter along the lane towards us and stop to chat. The rapport is instant. They recognise the logo "MacPac" on our back packs and want to discuss New Zealand. There must be so many people in the world who would be so interesting to get to know. How could you ever meet them all?

We have been climbing steadily all day and as we come out into the open a wonderful sight meets our eyes. Laid out before us is a wide expanse of water, Cromarty Firth, leading to climbing green hills. Behind the hills stand the high proud peaks of purple and grey misty mountains with poetic names such as Cloch Mhor and Ben Whyvis. A magical scene and I can not look at it enough. I want to eat it and keep it inside me, be part of it and it of me. The stuff of dreams and myths.

We come down the hill to the water and cross a long long long bridge over Cromarty Firth then again meet the A9 which is to be our companion for several miles before we turn off to Evanton and a campsite.

The pub is bustling with activity which bodes well for a good meal and we are not disappointed. A short stroll back to the campsite through the shafting shadows of a summer evening and quickly into the tent before the midges come out. It will be a restless night, too warm for tenting and nylon.

Day 83

Evanton to Durnoch Bridge

The sky is mostly blue as I walk back to the tent from the shower. I can hear the rushing of the river which last night lulled us to fitful slumber.

'Haste Ye Back' reads the sign as we leave the campsite to walk the long walk to Durnoch Bridge. More lane walking today and the countryside is pleasant to be part of. For now tiny lanes accompany the A9 in its northwards line but soon our options will be limited and there will be no way but the A9. So we make the most of these wandering, peaceful lanes and think how much change we have seen along the way and how many wonderful experiences we have had. Now the task is to walk the miles and enjoy the countryside as we can, whereas before every day was a complete joy and we were so much on our own and didn't have to think too much about the commerce of the world. We were distanced because we didn't use the regular thoroughfares of the population. Now it is ordinary because we have to share, before it was extraordinary.

The day is lightened when Philip knocks on the door of a country cottage for some water and the lady invites us in. We spend an hour or so with her chatting and drinking coffee and learn that there is a campsite by Durnoch Bridge. This is not on our map. We make our farewells and walk on, now keen to reach our day's end. The A9 is joined at Alness then a few miles down the hill to Durnoch Bridge. The campsite is a strip of hedged green by a roundabout with the roar of traffic on one side and the whoosh and hoot of trains on the other. When the trains go by the ground trembles and shudders and the tent pegs vibrate visibly. When a truck roars past we feel it is heading straight for us. Can't see we will get much sleep tonight. Outside the muted light is thick with midges.

Day 84

Durnoch Bridge to Golspie

The A9 draws out ahead northwards and into Sutherland. Cars and trucks whizz by and the air is full of fumes. We grit our teeth and set out along the grass verge at the edge of the road.

We stop for breakfast by the road near a large stone presented to the people of Sutherland in friendship by the Germans. This seems a strange thing to me and I wonder at friendship between the Germans and the British with such a history of mistrust.

At a gate by a field we stop again to take off our coats and suddenly we are startled by a deep Welsh voice behind us. "Walking far...John o'Groats maybe?" he asks. Where has he come from? We are miles from anywhere and there was no-one behind us on the road. So we meet Chris, another end-to-ender, a funny, happy Welshman with a deep strong voice. He was sleeping in the hills behind the wood at the side of the road. Chris has been walking from Lands End, mostly by road for 6 weeks. He has been using an AA roadmap for his journey. "I've only had five washes the whole way" he chuckles "and

lucky for you two I had my last one yesterday in a lovely pool beneath a waterfall in the woods". Chris wild pitched every night. No comfort for him on his long journey. We tell him briefly of our journey and set off together up the road. We carefully avoid the tarmac, he walks easily on the road, expecting the whizzing cars to avoid him. It worries me.

Chris' jolly company makes the miles fly by as we walk together, we three each weaving the pattern of our life for the other to see. When we stop for tea Chris chews on a chocolate bar and gulps some Lucazade and marches on. I think of Dirk's comments on the habits of British walkers. "Chocolate and pop and no civilised breaks." I smile to myself. A special meeting. He leaves us finishing our coffee and strides ahead. We watch his fit form merge with the distance and I hope we see him again.

Today seems a fragmented day and after not sleeping much last night we are very tired. We had planned to walk to Brora or beyond but when we reach Golspie Philip sees my tiredness, reaches out for my hand and leads me down a lane to the sea and a tiny semidetached cottage on the ocean front which does B&B. We are so tired but in spite of our weary bodies we are overjoyed to see the sea again. This is nothing like the blue Pacific of Australia but is a grey pearlised sea lapping a grey sandy shore.

Day 85 Golspie to Helmsdale

These people are so proud of their B&B but I wish he would not smoke when we are eating our breakfast. He sits on a stool by the door in an ungainly slump as though his body is without bones. His torso concertinas and arms and legs protrude at strange angles, like twigs getting ready to fall from a tree. He is a strange man with gaps in his teeth which ooze wet bubbles as he makes crude comments about women. His wife, short, rounded and wearing a small floral print dress laughs and gazes at him as though he is the most wonderful man on earth. Well they say that there is someone for everyone. I turn and look through the window pane which is frosted with salt and watch the North Sea lapping at the shore. It is good to be by the sea again and we are looking forward to today's walking and the total change of scenery it will bring.

The day is dull and cold, the sea is grey flecked with white, the gulls swoop and cry above and large drifts of seaweed make dark smudges on the grey sands. North we go, the sea at our side.

Only four days to the finish and it seems an eternity. The sun, trying to break through the cloud cover, makes the air shimmer with light. For 7 or so miles we will walk on the edge of this land of many battles, right beside the now silver foil waters and it will make for a pleasant change. Our spirits lift at the prospect of avoiding the road for a while. The path tracks around the headland and we cross a bubbling burn by a small bridge. A castle-like house of grey stone with miniature crenellated towers stands guard by the bridge. Maybe it was once a gate house? The feet that have walked these shores are many.

The shiny air around is pinging with history. My mind holds wonderful visions of the men and women who were part of this land as my feet are led by the path through fields bright with daisies and deep pink foxgloves, long shifting colourless grasses and the steel grey sea glimmering on our right beyond silvery sands in the hazy sunshine.

Soon we enter the gardens of the fairytale form of Dunrobin Castle which is the seat of the Earls and Dukes of Sutherland. It sits high on a forested hill facing the North Sea, pale against the dark woods, and is a strange mix of styles. From the back it has the semblance of a French chateau with round stair turrets at its corners and high windows beneath the roof but from the front looks an austere Victorian manor house. The Sutherland family became Earls of Sutherland in 1235. Dunrobin is thought to be named after Robert or Robin the 6th Earl. The upper floors of this elegant castle are reputed to be haunted by the spirit of the 14th Earl's daughter. She was caught eloping with her lover whom her father considered most unsuitable and he imprisoned her in an attic room. She tried in vain to escape by climbing down a rope but her father caught her and in her surprise, she fell to her death.

A small side path brings us to a monument in a secret garden. The inscriptions on the monument bring tears to my eyes, not for the death of the young men listed here who had died in the war but for the sadness of a mother whose 7 year old boy had been killed by a carriage on the streets of London. His mother created this beautiful memorial garden for him and then one year later she died in an air disaster. She wrote a poignant verse for him "In every moonbeam, every twinkling star, every ray of sunshine and every beam of light, I am with you".

The path leads on through the castle gardens and beyond to the beachside. Seals bark and play in the water, their noses are black triangles floating on the waves like pieces of jet set in silver. Others lie or slide slug like on the sand and they all watch us, ready to make their escape. We find a huge piece of driftwood to sit on for morning tea and Philip makes a table from an upturned lobsterpot or creele as they call them here. We sit there by the silver sea, ashen sands and bobbing seals and we revel in the isolation and end of the world feel of the remote north and it seems that crowded cities are a distant memory.

The sands of the beaches and bays bring us to Brora where, sadly, we again have to walk on the A9. 11 miles to Helmsdale. Off we trudge. The road is not too busy but we watch the rain moving in towards us from the sea in a solid wall of water and mist and it is wet weather gear again. Mountains rise steeply to our left and now there is only a very narrow strip of accessible land along the coast and this carries the A9 and a railway line, running side by side. Not much to be said about the A9 except that the verge is littered with dead animals. The road takes an exacting toll on them - rabbits, hedgehogs and birds in great number and all picked over by carrion. A stone in a lay-by by the road at Lothberg marks the place where the last wolf in Sutherland was killed in 1700. The stone reads: "TO MARK THE PLACE NEAR WHICH (ACCORDING TO SCOPE'S "ART OF DEERSTALKING") THE LAST WOLF IN SUTHERLAND WAS KILLED BY THE HUNTER, POLSON IN OR ABOUT THE YEAR 1700, THIS STONE WAS ERECTED

BY HIS GRACE THE DUKE OF PORTLAND, K.C., A.D. 1924." Will man always clear the earth for his own selfish purposes?

More heavy rain squalls blow in from the sea making the day unpleasant and at last, footsore and extremely tired we trudge into Helmsdale, a tiny fishing village that hugs the seashore and has a traditional and sheltered natural harbour. Helmsdale is a neat well laid out village whose history goes back to the Vikings who settled at the mouth of the River Helm. We stride down narrow Ulleshall Street where the doors of the stone and whitewashed terrace houses open directly onto the street. Everything appears bright and fresh no doubt well washed by the frequent rain showers.

Our B&B window looks out over the busy working harbour, still the focus of life in this village and we watch as the bright little fishing boats skim over the glassy waters to the rougher grey seas beyond in search of their bounty from the sea. A dangerous occupation.

Day 86 Helmsdale to Latheron Wheel

A silvery sapphire sea under a tall pale blue sky, a small walled harbour and old stone cottages framed by a wooden window of the B&B with lace curtains moving gently in the breeze. The fishing boats are coming in after a night at sea and we are moving out after a good night's sleep in a warm bed. From Helmsdale the hills rise steeply and today it will be a long haul to the first hilltop through a warm morning.

Deer play down the steep bracken covered sides of the tall hills whose edges disappear steeply into the misty seascape. Only their heads and upper bodies are visible and they are well camouflaged amid the rusty vegetation. We have drama again in our surroundings but the road is dreary and the walking tough on the feet. From the hilltop we watch the long wisps of mist float in from the sea and in moments we are in a white world. No danger of losing our way though, we are on the A9. The danger will come from the cars. We find this out very early in the day when a mad driver in a speeding black sedan overtakes another vehicle and almost runs Philip down - Philip leaps aside only moments before the car races over the space he just occupied. The road twists and winds its way over the high sheer edged braes. We have received many warnings about the Berriedale Braes - 13% gradient they say, so steep, ho ho, wait until you get there.

We see a cyclist who says Welsh Chris is only a couple of miles ahead of us. We had thought he would be many more miles away by now. The Berriedale descent to Berriedale Waters is not so bad and the small village sheltered in the steep valley where Berriedale Water and Langwater meet before joining the sea is picturesque and perfect for the label on a bottle of spring water. Caithness Spring Water is bottled here. Bus shelters provide comfortable resting spots for us and we find one on the edge of the road before crossing the water. Out comes the Trianga and soon the water is boiling for the making of coffee. A woman in a white dress waves from the other side of the road. She hurries over to greet us

and it transpires that she is also Australian and lives in this tiny community. Her husband plans to make Spring Water Ice Cubes for adding to Scottish Whisky.

It is the northern side of the Brae that has the reputation for great difficulty but we climb it with an easy stride, very easy and we marvel at how athletic we must have become. The mist, heavy and damp, is still with us and it stays that way all day. Up here there is mist for most of the year and a sunny day is a rarity. For now we are in Caithness and the land is empty and just beyond the A9 it falls sharply over great cliffs into the sea. The people here live in a milky world, and the song words "touch the sky" are apt for the Caithness sky is on many days within a fingertip's reach.

Caithness is a flat and bleak land and is unusual in its almost total absence of trees and shrubs. The open rolling land is mostly rural but has moorland, peat bogs and a few scattered settlements. You could walk to the edge of this land and literally fall off into the sea along most of the dramatic coast. It is like a table. The coast is home to many varieties of birds and their wild and lonely cries fit well with the empty gale ravaged land.

At Latheron Wheel we sit outside the closed up pub in the cold damp air for over an hour waiting for someone to come and open up. B&B signs are all around. It would appear they are keen for business. When at about 6pm the landlord finally answers our intermittent knocking he casually tosses his head and says he doesn't feeling like doing B&B tonight then closes the door. "Bastard" Philip grumbles "why doesn't he take his bloody signs in?" Sigh. Back down the road we had seen another sign, they are few and far between but luckily for us the tourists are sparse on the ground as well and we spend a comfortable night with a couple who share their home and their company with us as though we are old friends.

Day 87 Latheron Wheel to Wick

We are getting so close now I am frightened of how I will feel at the end. My emotions are confused. It seems impossible yet altogether probable that we will complete our journey. I have a great longing to arrive but a great fear of the finish for when we step into John O'Groats it will be the end of a dream and where do we go from there? It is not easy to begin our walking for today. This journey has become our life but tomorrow when we walk in to John O'Groats everything will change and we will return to our other selves, the ones that have to think about work, grocery shopping, filling the car with petrol, paying bills and all the ordinary routine chores associated with suburban life. After so long on the road how will we adapt to that?

With full stomachs we smile wistfully at each other and step onto the tarmac. We have not gone far when we spot Chris packing his kit in a field by the roadside. He has been down at the beach talking to the fishermen. "Slept on the beach last night" he says "was grand. Bought some fresh fish off the boats and cooked them up on my little barbeque."

Not far to go now. Jilly will be waiting for me at the end. I'll be glad to finish". We walk together, his company bright and cheerful. He has some great stories. Some real tall tales. The miles speed by under our strong legs. We stop by the road on a stone wall for morning tea. The road is much quieter now as we are so far north and not much traffic comes this way. Chris stops with us, deeply amused by our custom of coffee and cake at 11.30am every day. He has the gift of the gab and I think he should be Irish not Welsh. He seems to know everything and is funny and fun. His company is most welcome.

Chris is a train driver who has time to walk. He walks the hills, mountains and valleys of England and Europe during his time off from his job. Just him and his tent. He says "You know what I wish I had done. I wish that every morning when I woke I took a picture of the scene through the flaps of my tent. God I've camped in some places". He tells us that he is usually very overweight but the Chris we see is lean, strong and coloured tan and ruddy by the elements.

The sea is lemonade and the day is honey. The sun burns off the mist and we can at last see the countryside around us. A harsher, wilder and flatter scene than Cornwall but still having the same windswept fresh outdoors kind of feel. I suppose it makes sense for they are the beginning and the end. Green fields sweep down to the high sea cliffs, sheep graze and beside the road and in the fields beyond is a profusion of wildflowers, yellow trefoil and red campion and sea pink. The fierceness of the wind denies trees any existence and the land is broken only by stone walls or dykes, some growing colourful flowers from their crevices. Crumbling stone crofts, shelter of other days, sit beside the newer farm worker cottages that have replaced them. Crofters work their small farms on the more fertile sections of the land. In the distance at the cliff edges are many tall stones marking history. The area is rich with the remains of pre-historic occupation and through early history wild bands of Norse settlers landed and gradually established themselves. Settlements extended from Latherton to Berriedale and many of the names are Norse in origin. I muse at the wild episodes played out here over the ages. Thousands of years of life and change and invasion - Norsemen and probably many others pulling out of the mist in their long boats to these green edges to kill, to pillage and then take the land for their own.

The walk along the A95 into Wick is the march to the beginning of the end.

Wick, an estuary town whose greatest prosperity came in the 1800's when it was a thriving Herring port, is a disappointment. I had learned that Wick was originally a Viking settlement (the Norse *vík* means bay) and in my mind I had endowed it with a wild romance, so far north in these untamed lands. It is indeed a town of some character, well maintained and busy but I would say, fairly ordinary. The depressed state of the town after the end of the herring boom days was lifted in the 70's with the outpour of oil from the North Sea when Wick was used as a convenient base for offshore supply vessels. This lift in prosperity led to the building of an airport just north of the town on a Second World War airfield. We share friendship over a drink with Chris and talk some more of our journeys before parting ways. We head off along the river to a campsite to sleep through the night of sun and birdsong. Chris goes back down to the sea to barbeque and

camp. Tomorrow is **the day**. Tomorrow will see us to the end. I have butterflies in my stomach.

From left to right:
Glenfarg
River Tweed, Scotland
We made it, both of us!
Caithness, Scotland



Day 88 Wick to John o'Groats

The hour is early, very early when we leave the campsite. The day is bright and clear under a blanket of blue. Nature is being kind today, the last of our long days.

Outside Wick the sign reads John o'Groats - 16 miles.

We stop for a photo and the next sign, two miles on, reads 14 miles. Another photo. Anxious now for the end and full of reflections and images of the last 87 days we rally our energy and step along the long flat road in the early misty morning. We pull up a wee brae into the small solid town of Keiss and stop at the General Store for a lemonade. We have travelled the length of Britain and this is the first lemonade we have indulged in. So then, we have not adopted the habits of British walkers. The store is set back from the road facing an old hotel. Packs beside us, our backs leaning against the shop window with legs stretched on the car park tarmac in the warm day we lift our bottles and gulp the fizzy liquid. Chris rounds the corner full of smiles and anticipation of the end of his journey. He is to meet his wife, Jilly at 3pm beneath the sign at John o'Groats so will dally a while in Keiss to give her bus time to arrive at John o'Groats. She will cheer his arrival.

Our breaks today are all on the roadside but the traffic is too minimal to interrupt us. "Our last coffee break" Philip says wistfully. I don't want to speak. There is too much inside me. The miles seemed endless, stretching to dreamlike proportions by our wish to meet the line. But now, now we are almost there we dally over our coffee but our thoughts are our own and we sit in silence.

An ancient man leaves his front door and walks to the wall of his property where it meets the road. He is a gnome maker and his gnomes come in many sizes and colours and stand in little groups in his garden, gazing at us with unmoving painted eyes. The gnome maker eyes our packs, lifts his eyebrows and smiles. He has seen our kind before and maybe wonders "why?" but all he says is, "3 miles to go, up yonder brae, round the corner then yer downhill all the way to the harbour". We call our thanks and hurry on, it seems our feet have a wish of their own.

The green flat fields change to peat moorlands and hills. Dark grasses with cottony balls nodding above them grow in great clusters and in the distance the dark heather appears dusted with snow. White feathers of mist are followed by a heavier thicker bank moving across the land obscuring our view. In contrast the road edge is wealthy with bright flowers of pale pink Thrift, deep cerise Red Campion and soft mauve Common Dog Violet.

Denied of a view of the end of our journey we walk like blindmen down the hill.

The road verge is wide and sandy and we write a message in the sand for Chris. "NOT FAR NOW". He probably won't notice it, or a puff of wind may erase it, but just in case, a little encouragement at the end for a walker alone.

Breath quickens and crazy sensations are building within us, our hearts thumping. Road side houses loom out of the mist and alongside the road the sign reads JOHN O'GROATS.

My stomach lurches and winds itself into a tight knot rising up through my oesophagus and constricting my throat which is now aching with feeling. We are two rigid stick figures trying to cope with the disturbance of our emotional balance. I look at Philip and it all flows free. My neck begins to gulp with sobs and tears stream down my face. Philip's arm goes around my shoulders and I can see his eyes are glistening with tears. But still we have not reached our goal - a white line on the ground by the John o'Groats Hotel on the edge of the harbour. So we continue, me blubbing as I walk.

John o'Groats is strung out in a necklace of houses down to the harbour. A small kiosk, 'The First and the Last' stands beside the harbour and a short distance away on a green rise is the white and turreted gothic structure of the John O'Groats Hotel. Further back behind this is a complex of modern shops and facilities. Elated now, full of adrenalin fuelled energy at the last and with an agitated quietness between us we make our way now to the culmination of our task. Soon we will reach the sea at the uppermost of Britain and the land will meet the water and there will be nowhere else to walk. A kind of euphoric numbness of disbelief sets in and we feel we are floating when we at long last come to the white line that reads "finish". Reality hits and we yell out in joy. Lands End's sister sign at John o'Groats is a white post mounted on a stand of irregularly shaped stones with a white circle atop it containing the words John O'Groats. Its untidy arms point across the flat open land and the blue grey seas giving distances and create the feeling that you are standing in a far-off and faraway place. My mind reels and Philip shouts "we have done it, we have done it". Our first ever long distance walk - 1832 kims, 1120 miles (by our pedometer) - we have done "the big one". Yes, we have made it.

We stand tightly holding hands looking out across the sea to the north to the filmy shape of the Orkneys. "You've forgotten something" Philip says. My hand reaches into my pocket and fingers the small sharp edged English stone. Carried safely the length of Britain. Now it is time for it to meet its destiny. Together we walk to the end of the wharf "go on, throw it" Philip says. It spins through the air and hits the sea with a soft splat. We turn towards the hotel. "Well, that's it" Philip says.

The Hotel is undergoing renovations but the bar is open. We walk into the bar to sign the book reserved for those who achieve this dream either by foot, or bicycle or pushing a pram, or some mad form of transport and are quizzed by the barman. I think carefully what to write and make our entry. The barman brings us our landmark drink. A free drink for those who have completed the journey. Looking through the register we see that we are walkers number 3 and 4 to complete the journey this year. We find the entry by Peter

Pope and he has left a message there for us as well. Well done Peter!! We will contact him when we return to London before leaving for Australia.

Later Chris and Jilly come in. We share a celebratory drink with them. Jilly confides in me that Chris too was tearful when he walked in. Hours pass in friendship and good cheer and after exchanging addresses we say an emotional farewell. Well met friend we will not lose touch.

We walk slowly to the camping ground on the far side of the harbour. Soon our tent is erected for the last time on this journey. It is the only tent in the field but this is somehow fitting.



Can anyone who has not walked these long miles truly understand the feeling of reaching the end? The final moment that is the culmination of a year's preparation and 88 days on our feet with a heavy load on our backs? No, I don't think so, but for us, when we are old and our life's light is failing we will know that at least we have achieved this one great thing, this test of resolve and inner strength. We are not athletes nor anything close, we are ordinary folk who decided to try and do something extraordinary. We are just us and no more except now, now we are part of a small group - end to enders. Two of the few who have walked these long and lonely miles. But what a splendid journey and what a great adventure it has been.



We made it!!!!