

Twelve months ago today Barbara and I were on the Wessex Ridgeway, the first leg of the Greater Ridgeway. In retrospect we could have done things better, including shortening our days and taking two days over hilly sections of more than 16-miles. Needless to say, we fell into the trap of carrying too much, as one does when a long way from home and without a permanent, or even temporary, base from which to operate in the UK.

The Greater Ridgeway is made up of four long distance footpaths, two of them National Trails. The most challenging sections are found in Dorset, although the Wessex Ridgeway in Dorset is well waymarked for the most part. The Wiltshire leg is less well marked and the local Ramblers likely stretched for resources and volunteers. If cherry-picking your walks, and not - as we were - hellbent on walking from Lyme Regis to Hunstanton, there are sections of the path in Wiltshire which one would be none the poorer for omitting.

The Ridgeway proper, while traversing beautiful country, is - like many National Trails - as easy to follow as a well marked road. Maps only come into play if you need to move some distance from the Ridgeway to find accommodation. Here I should state that, when we left a trail or path for the night, we usually rejoined it the following day at the closest point to our lodging and did not retrace our steps so as to follow every step of the indicated route. In so doing we missed no points of historic or scenic interest, and - since we walked all the way - still rambled from Dorset to Norfolk.

Guidebooks, in my experience, seem to be written by people carrying nothing more than a bottle of water, an apple, a sandwich and an anorak, not forgetting map, compass, camera & mobile phone. Put all that into a bag along with the boots you will be wearing and there's some weight there already. On routes without water points and hostelieries you will probably carry at least two litres of water and extra food, along with a first aid kit. People like us like to don clean clothes, underwear at the very least, in the morning. Spare socks are essential since damp socks, no matter how well fitting and worn in your boots, will cause blisters. The list goes on, and keeping the total weight of pack plus all accessories below 12kg is a challenge.

In 2006 I carried more than 20kg north on the coastal section of the Cleveland Way. I had to prop my pack up and sit down into it before I could fasten the straps and hoist myself to my feet by clutching the nearest tree or fencepost. Discovering that, after 40-years, I could still do what I had been trained to do as an 18-year old drafted reluctantly into a South African light infantry battalion was gratifying. It almost made the torturous days bearable, that and the magnificent coastal scenery of my ancestral homeland.

In 2010 I tried to be smarter, and invested in a smaller, lighter Aarn bodypack of revolutionary load bearing design. Needless to say, I managed to stuff too much into it and - by the time I added four bottles of water, two cameras, a PDA, guidebook and a GPS unit - I was over 16kg. Not as bad as my debut on the National Trails in 2006, but still carrying a little too much for comfort. The real lifesaver turned out to be a pair of Aarn pacer poles, specially designed to give walkers not only better balance, but the human equivalent of all wheel drive when climbing hills. They work, and I can't recommend them highly enough.

Before returning to the object of this exercise, our time on the Icknield way, I might mention that I am a fifth generation South African of English and Scottish descent. I left South Africa in the early 1970s, despairing of a peaceful solution in our country as it was at that time, and studied education in London before being seduced by advertisements in the Times Educational Supplement to teach in Australia. Australia I visualised as the country South Africa might have been, but for Suffice it to say that I had a lot of learning to do but have never regretted the choices I made. Like many English speaking South Africans I was educated to be an "Englishman". Concerning that too I have no regrets. I love your country as my own.

We tried to follow Ray Quinlan's Cicerone guide to "The Greater Ridgeway", the only publication of its type, for the first eight days. By the time we reached the Ridgeway proper we were improvising, depending on the state of our feet and the availability of accommodation. I had booked ahead for the first eight nights; after that we found our way as best we could, using TICs or the internet. Thanks to Vodafone, mobile internet on my PDA for only 50p a day - and that only on the days when you use it - proved a God send.

Our last night on the Ridgeway proper was spent at the Ranger's Lodge, a delightful, slightly upmarket, B&B close to the national trail outside Wigginton. The following day we made our way to Ivinghoe Beacon, and encountered people in numbers on the trail for the first time since Avebury. The extent of erosion from walkers on the slopes approaching the summit was disappointing. Hopefully, when funds are available, the trail authority will impose 'track discipline' by fencing and paving, allowing the vegetation on either side to regenerate.

Our first hours on the Icknield Way were wonderful after an early picnic on Ivinghoe Beacon. Lulled into a false sense of security by a well waymarked path, we came unstuck in the wooded area between Whipsnade Zoo and Whipsnade village. There were three sets of waymarks including the word Icknield. Eventually we opted for the newest set of waymarks, and took off in the wrong direction on the Icknield bridle path - as we later discovered - following a different route towards Ivinghoe Beacon.

After three miles, two ridges and nothing that looked remotely like Dunstable, out came the laptop with Fugawi (OS) UK. My somewhat rudimentary Garmin eTrex was connected and - surprise, surprise - we found ourselves retracing our steps to Whipsnade. Her memories softened by time, Barbara kindly volunteers this as 'her mistake'. In truth it was mine. Trying to keep up with someone younger and spritelier, I had neglected to ensure that what I saw on the ground corresponded to what was read from the map.

The whole point about navigation is to know where you are at all times. The PDA, with inbuilt GPS, onto which I had downloaded sections of the OS maps, has a necessarily small screen. With all major footpaths marked the same way, not a problem in areas with only one LDP, its possible to be following the wrong one if it crosses your path at some point or moves parallel with it for some distance. Of course keeping our eyes on the direction of the sun, or looking at the compass occasionally, would have helped. Suffice it to say that, the wonderful institution that national trails are, they do spoil one. Its wise to remember that other paths, the best efforts of local Ramblers members notwithstanding, are bound to be more challenging.

If the Whipsnade debacle was not enough, on Dunstable Downs - with Dunstable in plain sight - I tried to descend too soon and take us onto a road which would have taken us away from Dunstable in a westerly direction. Looking at the map now, which seems perfectly clear, I can only wonder at my state of mind. Surely matching the marked route, p.172 of the Cicerone guide, to the contour lines and a quick glance at the lie of the land would have been enough.

By early evening we had followed the Icknield Way into Dunstable and were settled into the Black Cat. When I looked for it on the internet after our return to Australia, I was appalled to see that one punter had slated it as the worst B&B in Buckinghamshire. Let me hasten to set the record straight. The Black Cat, while neglected and run down pending - I suppose - renovation or even demolition was spotlessly clean and we were well looked after and served a full English breakfast in the adjacent café the following morning. The water was hot, the television worked for our motivational morning dose of BBC news. What more can a hiker ask for?

The real joy of rambling must be the ability to savour the moment, to take it all in and to write and sketch in the manner of a Wainwright or the late Richard Hayward, American author of

the British Footpath Handbook. Regrettably this did not happen, and my notes are limited to the occasional email and the daily SMS which I sent to record our location and progress.

We left the Black Cat in Dunstable and followed the Icknield Way path along the railway line into Luton before resuming urban walking towards Warden Hill. Although we passed through one nature reserve, we might just as well have followed the main road into Luton and would recommend this in wet weather as both faster and drier. The walking to Letchworth proved straightforward and we eventually found our lodging in a hotel above a highly recommended Indian restaurant. The hotel, which was being allowed to run down, was no better than the much maligned Black Cat, the room being much smaller and the television useless. The staff abandoned us to our fate when the restaurant closed, we appeared to be the only guests, there was no breakfast included and we let ourselves out the following morning. The beds were comfortable for all that, and it must have been a fine establishment in its heyday. Letchworth, laid out with a geometric precision uncharacteristic of most towns and cities in Britain, reminded me in some ways of nearby Canberra, also a product of the garden city vision but planned by an American architect.

We found both the Black Cat and the Letchworth hotel on the internet. You pay your money and you take your chance. Had the Icknield Way been at the start of our walk our advance planning would doubtless have been more detailed and we should have made better use of the excellent information gleaned from the Icknield Way association.

And so once more into the great outdoors and onto Royston. Without internet access in Letchworth, and yet to discover that I could connect a my PDA to my laptop and use it as a wireless modem to connect to the internet via Vodafone, we were unprepared when we descended the ridge onto a large recreation ground filled with people enjoying the early summer sun outside Royston. We sat on a bench, fired up the PDA with its 3" screen and Googled B&B in Royston. Eventually we found a wonderful lady who turned out to be a fair away hike on the northern side of town but this did not take us far from the Icknield Way. My recollection is that we spent three nights in all there, resting and catching up with our laundry.

By now we were finding anything up to 15-miles through what Ray Quinlan is pleased to call "easy country" to be quite manageable, even slightly overloaded as we were. Limiting total weight carried to about 12kg, no more than 15kg if possible, is something I can't recommend highly enough. Unlike the Ultralight Backpacker, Ryel Kestenbaum, I see no real advantage - given the, admittedly expensive, garments available nowadays - in walking without underwear or more than one change of socks or going to the extremes of shortening all the straps on one's pack, etc.

The great advantage of walking in lowland parts of the UK in summer is that one can get away with carrying little more than water, a snack and something waterproof, along with map, compass, guidebook, GPS unit, camera, phone, etc. In most areas everything one might need at short notice can be found on or near the path. Kestenbaum does make the point that, the stiffer the boot, the more likely one is to injure one's foot which should be able to flex naturally as one walks. I have found hybrid boots, midcuts designed and made along the same lines as running shoes, to be a good compromise. I'd settle for rugged shoes but for the ankle deep mud so frequently encountered at times other than mid-summer.

Royston to Great Chesterford passed without incident and we found ourselves on the station waiting for a train into Cambridge. Happy in many ways to be in Cambridge, it was disappointing to find the hotels overpriced and all the B&Bs we contacted fully booked. By the time we'd arrived the TIC, our usual saviour, had closed for the day. Cambridge was

crawling with visitors and tourists, including large numbers of overseas students, something which I had not expected to encounter in May. Eventually we found ourselves in the Youth Hostel which I had expected to be the first place to fill up. Its well appointed, as Youth Hostels go, although it could do with some tender loving care, a lick of paint, etc.

We made the most of the luxury of two nights in Cambridge, and the privilege of being able to take the train to the start of our next day's walk, to set out with only daypacks for the first time since leaving Lyme Regis on May 3rd. The train took us back to Great Chesterford and it was a remarkably swift and easy 18-miles to Stetchworth, apart from sections overgrown with nettles to which, fortunately, I am not particularly reactive although I laid about with my hiking poles like an explorer hacking his way through the jungle. Who would have thought nettles could grow that tall? Upon reflection, someone seeking to cherrypick the Icknield Way could probably omit that section without missing anything of particular interest. This is not on account of the nettles, and the country is certainly pleasant enough although unremarkable in the context of the entire Greater Ridgeway. Writing this on a chilly autumn night on the Southern Tablelands of NSW, just outside the Australian Capital Territory, however, I'd like few things better than to be on the Icknield Way path heading for Stetchworth.

We arrived in Stetchworth to find the pub only opened evenings, a commentary on the village's dormitory status. What to do next? Newmarket was another three and a bit miles, not on the Icknield Way. After some deliberation I called the number I'd seen on a passing taxi and asked whether someone could take us into Newmarket. The driver who turned up proved an excellent companion, the charge was reasonable and he was modestly unassuming about accepting what I had thought was an obligatory tip. Perhaps we did not look as if we could stretch to a tip after 18-miles on Shanks Pony, or perhaps we had strayed into one of those earthly paradises tucked away in odd corners of the world where people are more about people and less about avarice and greed. Be that as it may, I would be happy to meet the gentleman in question again to have a yarn over a pint or two.

Given Newmarket's renown everywhere where people follow the horses, it was surprising to find ourselves on a very tiny station awaiting a train to Cambridge. We duly spent our second and last night in the Youth Hostel, and I struggled with the intricacies of ordering a pizza in the UK where, like Canada, you pay for a base and then extra for the various 'toppings', like fillings in a sandwich. In Australia the same fastfood chains, or bearing the same name at the least, offer all pizzas as combinations of ingredients. You take your choice from the menu, and the prices relate more to the size of the pizza than what's covering it. A 'Supreme' for example has the lot, cheese, tomato, onion, green peppers, olives & anchovies. 'Hawaiian' is cheese, tomato, ham & pineapple. The 'Meat Lovers' is rich with cheese, tomato, salami, peperoni & ground beef, and so it goes. Usually I have no trouble communicating with people in a multi-cultural setting. The Pizza Hut near the YHA in Cambridge was an exception. To be fair to the young man attending to me, I had had a very long day.

At this point I caved in and telephoned an old and dear friend from my time at the University of London in the early 1970s who lives with his wife at Bar Hill outside Cambridge. As I knew he would, and as he had already done, he insisted that we spend some time with them. He no longer teaches full time but has a job as an examiner which keeps him whizzing around the Midlands attending meetings, visiting schools and bringing no end of paperwork home. In addition to the wonderful hospitality we enjoyed, Brian drove us to Stetchworth the following day, fetched us from Icklingham, and repeated the process the day after that when we walked from Icklingham to Knettishall.

Stetchworth to Icklingham made for walking that was both interesting and scenically appealing by comparison with some of the duller sections the previous day. That being said, to those who love walking no walk is ever dull and there is interest everywhere for those who keep their eyes and ears open.

Proceeding to our final day on the Icknield Way, the long haul through the forest is taxing and we envied those who had chosen to do it on bicycles. The country became more interesting after Euston and, eventually, we celebrated our arrival at the end of the Icknield Way by posing for each other's photographs.

We spent the weekend with our friends in Bar Hill, including a wonderful day out to the Norfolk Coast, before departing on Peddar's Way at the start of the new week. This took us over the next four days and three nights to Hunstanton where we were in luck with B&Bs and found such a charming host that we elected to spend several nights there and use the Coast Hopper to journey to and fro as we completed the Norfolk Coast path to Cromer in three days walking. Hadrian's Wall, which I walked point to point using a baggage service over six days in October 2006, has a similar 'hopper' bus allowing hikers to settle into the B&B or other lodging of their choice and walk using only day packs each day. It's an asset to any national trail and goes a long way to solving the perennial problem of accommodation, where to spend a rest day or shelter from a spell of bad weather, and where to leave luggage while walking.

In retrospect my walks in the UK to date have been a little like some of the projects undertaken around the home over the years. You do the job the first time to learn how to do it, and the second time to get it right. Doing the Icknield Way again would be sheer pleasure, perhaps in the reverse direction and making better use of the publications of the Icknield Way association. Ray Quinlan's guide to the Greater Ridgeway is excellent, and the only one of its type, but 18 to 19-mile days, while manageable in the east of England are mightily challenging in Dorset.

As for what's next, I'm lusting after the End to End. It can be done in 60-days, fewer if you forget about heritage sites and areas of natural beauty and take to the roads. For those who have learned the hard way about 20-mile days, like to saunter rather than stride, and habitually stuff too much into their packs, it can be stretched out to 85-days. An Australian couple who completed it recently built in at least one rest day a week and probably did not take the most direct route. It took them four months.

Since four months away from home is likely to test my bank account and place unbearable strain on my marriage, the only choice is to walk in stages; perfectly satisfactory and enjoyable unless one is hell bent on collecting the certificate only awarded to those who complete LEJOG, in either direction, on foot during a single journey. The answer for those short of time, of course, is to cycle but I'm reserving that for when I'm too old to walk.

Thanks to Andrew McCloy and his now out of print 'Land's End to John O'Groats - A Choice of Footpaths for Walking the Length of Britain', I realised that I'm part way there if I use his suggestions to link up the paths already walked. He recommends the South-West Coast path to Lyme Regis, the Wessex Ridgeway, the Icknield Way, linking paths to Filey and the coastal Cleveland Way, linking paths to Heddon-on-the-Wall and thence to Edinburgh. I can tick off the entire Greater Ridgeway, the Cleveland Way from Scarborough to Saltburn, and the Northumberland Coast Path from Alnmouth to Bamburgh. That's more than half way by the shortest route, less by McCloy's East Route which is the longest of the several possible routes using different combinations of national trails, cycle paths, LDPs, local footpaths and minor roads. It will happen, just not sure when.

In the meantime I shall continue my Rambler's membership and continue to draw inspiration from that wonderful organisation. My dream was ignited twelve years ago by Lonely Planet's "Walking Britain". As most would know, its an overview of what's there rather than a detailed guide although perfectly adequate on well waymarked routes like national trails. Other more detailed guides must be consulted for specific regions and, in some cases, the only information is that recorded by enthusiasts on the internet. A mapping GPS can replace bundles of maps if one is confident in its use, but the best advice is always to pause and check when uncertain rather than push on in the hope of the way becoming clearer. No one needs to add an unnecessary five miles or so to a 20-mile day.

"My friends, we will not go again or ape an ancient rage,
Or stretch the folly of our youth to be the shame of age,
But walk with clearer eyes and ears this path that wandereth"
- G.K. Chesterton

And when those knees begin to protest too much, dust off that bicycle.