

A Long Walk To Shipston

My friend Martin Foster sent me an email in January asking if I would be interested in joining him on a challenge to complete all the walks in Peter Titchmarsh's book "20 Walks in Shipston Country". Perhaps he has slipped on the ice and bumped his head to come up with this mad idea, but I thought it best to humour him and agreed to have a go at the challenge, thinking he would come to his senses when the swelling went down. But it soon became clear he was serious about this "Adventure" and we began to make detailed plans. Martin told me the total distance for all the walks was about 106 miles, with a similar distance involved in driving between walks, as they are spread widely around the district. It was therefore important to minimise the amount of driving, so we devised a set of routes, which combined some closely located walks into one big route with no driving between those walks.

Peter's book starts and finishes each walk at a pub, but we couldn't follow that rule with our combined routes. However, we did agree to cover every inch of every walk in the direction described in the book, but our start and finish points would be different in our combined routes. For instance, walks 2,3,4 and 8 are in a close group centred around Ilmington Hill, so we decided to do all those walks in a clover leaf shaped route covering Paxford, Ebrington, Mickleton and Ilmington. The problem with that scheme is that we would have to ascend mighty Ilmington Hill three times from its base, one after the other from different directions, in one day. Ilmington Hill at 259m is the highest point in Warwickshire, so we would get to know the hill very well.

In the early stages of planning, we hadn't looked for any driving support and it was becoming a looming problem. But that's when Ian McConnel came to our rescue and generously offered his services, which solved all the outstanding problems of transport and refreshment support. We then became a team, with an obtainable objective, a viable plan of action, and the necessary resources to complete the task. Ian took on the Logistics, Martin the Social contacts, and I took on route planning and Navigation. To that end I reconnoitred all 20 walks in the weeks before the start. By then my head was full of lots of route info, but it was in danger of getting all jumbled up. One field and stile looks just like any another after a few weeks of mixing in my head.

Someone asked me if I'd done anything like this before. Well thirty years ago we would have run the whole distance virtually nonstop in one day, as I have done in the past in the Lake District. But as we are now a bit older we decided to split the 106 miles into three parts, day one 40 miles, day two 38 miles and day three 28 miles. We agreed to walk at about 3mph if we could, over the 14 hours of days one and two, and 10 hours for day three. That meant starting days one and two at 5am, and 9am on day three as it was a Sunday, a day of rest !!

Ian then contacted Rebecca at SHN and gave her our itinerary and Rebecca's team started the fund raising publicity for the Challenge. With photos taken and articles in the local press I realised we had passed the point of no return. There would be no going back now on our commitments to SHN and the sponsors, they would want action, not just words.

On Friday 10th April, I was up at 3am, had breakfast, packed my gear and was ready for Ian when he arrived at 4:30am. We drove round to collect Martin, but it took a lot of door knocking to get him out. These youngsters like their beds !! We then set off for the Churchill Arms in Paxford and started our first section of day one walks at 4:55am. After saying goodbye to Ian and walking into the darkness on our 17 mile journey, I felt as if we were going into the unknown, leaving civilisation behind, would we ever see Ian again ?

I won't go into all the details of each walk, as it would become a long list of places visited, but I would like to thank all those who turned out to meet and to walk with us. I must have come across as arrogant when I lectured them about having to walk at about 3 mph, as we had a long way to go and couldn't wait for anyone. But I must especially apologise to one man who kept chatting to me and I had to explain that I had to concentrate on navigation, so would he please go and chat to Martin who likes to talk !! Talking to people does have its advantages though. As we began the climb of Brailes Hill from Cherrington, I overtook a couple and gave them a curt "hello" as I passed. But Martin engaged them in conversation and was given a £10 donation to SHN, so it pays to be friendly !!

On day three, we were walking along the top edge of Whichford Wood, and looking down into the dense trees I thought of Robert Frost's poem, in which he says, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I made promises I have to keep, and miles to go before I sleep". I had similar thoughts at that moment. Further along we saw a large herd of deer in a nearby field. They had probably come out of the wood to see us pass by. They were looking at us from a safe distance, but I heard one of them say, "Look at those humans, walking all that way when they could just stay in a lovely place like this".

Martin is a very easy going, laid back, very gentle man, an ideal companion on this type of journey. He is also a lot younger than me, about the same age as my eldest Son, so I tended to boss him a bit at times, as one does with youngsters. When I retired many years ago, I officially became a Grumpy Old Man and I often feel the need to practice the skill, especially since my own children have all left home, or did they run away !!

Feet are the main sufferers on long walks, and they must be treated with loving care and attention. There are many theories as to how best to care for your feet. Some say pickle your feet in vinegar for a week, then bake them in the oven like conkers to toughen the skin. Others say change your shoes and socks often so that each fresh pair are unlikely to rub your feet in the same place, so large blisters don't develop, at least, not in one place. But my philosophy is "If it aint broke, don't try to fix it". I wore the same pair of shoes throughout the walk and had no problems, but I did wear a clean pair of socks each day. I told Martin I went to bed in my shoes, covering them in poly bags to keep the bed sheets clean !! Probably the best way to avoid foot problems is to buy shoes which are suitable for the expected conditions, comfortable and as light as practical, and to wear them sufficiently to break them in to your feet and walking style. Also, make sure your socks are seamless and free from stitching ribs that would provide friction points.

Throughout the walk, I carried a GPS tracker device, which reported our position at one-minute intervals. This allowed Ian, or anyone else with an iPad or Tablet, to monitor our progress. Ian made good use of this information to prepare for our arrival at the scheduled rendezvous points. The recorded route information also gives a minute by minute trail of our walk to demonstrate we have covered every inch of all 20 walks.

GPS devices can bring problems though. As we entered Paxford on day one, we were met at a junction of two narrow roads by the Eastern European driver of a huge juggernaut lorry. His GPS device had directed him to that place, but he wanted to get to Evesham. We tried our best to direct him to the A44, Oxford to Evesham road, but I don't know if he fully understood our directions, and I'm not sure we gave him the best advice !! They should only use GPS devices specifically for large lorries. He must have been a brave and skilled driver to take on such a task. I hope he reached Evesham safely.

We were very fortunate with the weather, both before and during the event, and we only experienced a few short showers. But a consequence of the dry conditions was very hard ground underfoot, especially where tractor wheels had left deep chevron marks when the ground had been soft. These can become tiresome after many hours and quite painful on the feet and ankles. I shall pass a new Law when I become Prime Minister; all tractors must tow a roller behind to flatten the ground on footpaths.

Friday afternoon became quite warm, especially out of the wind in the valleys, and I started to look forward to a nice cool drink somewhere. Those readers who have seen the film "Ice Cold In Alex" will recall that the group, led by John Mills, began to fantasise over drinking a glass of ice cold beer on their return to Alexandria, and I developed the same fixation. That need was satisfied when Martin kindly bought me a lovely pint of cold Larger Shandy at the Greedy Goose pub. I swigged my drink down in a couple of gulps and a burp, plonked the glass down on the bar, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand (Aussie style), gave out a big "ahhh that was good" and said "right lets be off then". But gentleman Martin had been talking to Ian and had only taken a couple of sips from his glass. So he had to gulp his drink down in a rush, he then spent the next ten minutes burping as his stomach dealt with the sudden rush of fluid.

Throughout our walk, Ian gave us superb support, always ready and waiting for us at each scheduled meeting point. I began to look for him with anticipation as we approached the venues. His presence helping to confirm we were in the right place, sometimes after a few hours of hard walking. We could not have completed this challenge in the time we achieved without Ian's dedicated support, so thank you Ian; you were the central part of our team, the vital link between Martin, Rebecca and me. Those who were in the Shoe pub at the finish may recall that I made the mistake of calling Ian "Peter". That's because after Peter moved to live in Kent, Ian took over the promotion of the 20 Walks book, and he almost became Peter in my mind, with the wrong name popping out to embarrass me when I was tired. In many respects, Ian is Peter as far as publicising and distributing the book around the district.

One advantage of doing all these walks is that I now have a much better knowledge of the Shipston district. Many of the places I visited were new to me, but during the challenge, we had to rush through, hardly looking at the views, eyes on the ground watching where we were going. On our descent of Brailes Hill on the final approach to Shipston, the clouds thickened and blackened over Ilmington Hill and it soon started to rain. It seemed as if the Gods of Shipston Country were angry with us for rushing about and not paying due regard to the beautiful views presented to us over the three days of the walks. The poem by W. H. Davies comes to mind "What is life if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare". One day I hope to return to some areas and will stand and stare.

Thank you Martin for inviting me to join you on this challenge, but next year please make sure you don't bang your head !! Thanks also to all our sponsors, and to Baggy, Landlord of the Shoe, who provided some free beer for our reception party on Sunday evening. I think Ian, Martin and me have helped to raise over £1000 for SHN, not a bad reward for a long walk to Shipston.

Mike Langrish
April 17th 2015.