

“Walking Home” – 12/11/2005



At 0445 I'm letting myself out my front door, to make the 24 mile walk home; many years have passed since I referred to my parents' house as home.

There's a chill, starlight accompanies me and my torch is silent as I pass through the graveyard, making my way to the canal towpath. I stop by Donald McCleod Craik., one of Great Bedwyn's war dead. Each year I leave my poppy on his grave, I apologise for disturbing him so early and promise to visit again next year. Crossing the railway tracks and the 18th century canal bridge, I start my first leg proper, leaving the confines of Great Bedwyn and heading for Bromham.

My torch is needed for the narrow squelch where the water's edge and the path are ill defined, for wider bits I walk unaided. A torch narrows one's vision to its immediate beam, in darkness the eyes look further, and the shades of grey make sense. I press the button on my new toy, my altimeter watch, bought from Lidl's, a bargain at £25. The price made me doubt its accuracy but it tells me the canal is level, I'm yet to climb.

It takes about two hours to reach Wootton Rivers, my path being called by pheasants, owls and other birds setting the trees alive. Here I leave the canal, dawn breaks and I take the roads to the car park below Martinsell Hill, my altimeter climbing all the way, accurate to within one meter. I rest, remove my fleece but keep my Gor-Tex jacket as an outer. I plaster my painful right hip with deep heat. An elderly gent pulls up in his car, to walk his dogs. They bark at the stranger, he asks if I'm hitching. I explain myself and press on, using compass to navigate across the grass downs and round clumps of trees. A handy post points me to Oare Hill. Crossing the Marlborough to Pewsey road I take in Huish Hill. The views begin to become outstanding. The skies predominantly blue I'm on one of Wiltshire's backbones; high up, with distant hills rising from the flat lands. This walk is part of wishing to understand the county of my birth a little better, wishing to interconnect hills and tracks.

Past Sopher Woods I get a twinge from my right knee. A little unusual with the heavy strapping I wear. All my Scottish and Welsh mountain walks have taken their toll. I continue on the beautiful ridge to Knap Hill, looking back to see the progress of paragliders, then cross up to the Wansdyke; a large dark aged ditch and bank,

originally stretching from Bristol to the fingers of Savernake Forest; an east west arrangement being the relic of a threat from the north. Checking altimeter and watch I predict I'll be at Shepherd's Shore for noon. The Wansdyke proves long and tiring and my right knee, which a tribe of pin jabbing patella fetish pygmies has settled behind, starts to complain bitterly. Lateral movement becomes impossible and I lead with my left leg and merely trail my right for balance.

To my right is Silbury Hill, nestled low on the floor in contrast to its towering appearance as one drives past. I'd wondered if I'd see deer on this walk. Here I'm treated, three breaking cover from the defences of the Wansdyke. White bottoms springing across the field in their wake.







The Wansdyke

After many false hopes of its approach I rest at Shepherd's Shore. I consider abandoning, phoning Dad for a lift. I press on, searching for the reserves of a steely determination that has seen me through many times. I start to meet a few more people, dog walkers, normal walkers and joggers. I limp on, noticing my progress is adequate. Ibuprofen relieves the hurt. Passing through Hill Cott I anticipate the treat of Roundway Downs. The corrugated steep slopes, carved by the ice age like the knuckles of a giant hand. I find the old London Road. Long abandoned, a mere cart track – for that is all it ever was. I squelch and slip my way down. I have feet of clay. Big clods of the stuff, my right knee smarts as sucking sounds accompany the lifting of a foot. I try for solid ground where I can until I reach Netherstreet. Then it's the simple plod into Bromham. I'm stopped by an older couple who tell me I look as if I've walked far. I explain I have, a few words pass and they know my parents. They'd just seen them at the Methodist Church Bazaar. I join my them, completing a ten and three quarter hour walk. I suddenly have celebratory status for my walk.



Roundway Down

Dad fetches me tea and cake, other eyes glance at the mess that's just walked in. I wander around. Passing one stall a chap asks me "Test your sense of smell for thirty pence?" I reply "If I sat down I think I'd be testing your sense of smell."