

The Big Walk

Our big walk started on August 13th from Islington, London and ended on August 21st in High Kelling, North Norfolk. It was approximately 150 miles.

Day one was a comfortable 15.4 miles and we set out from leafy Islington for the wilds of Cheshunt. Once we had crossed under the M25, I felt as if I had left London. We followed the river Lea north in sun and showers and after just a few hours saw an otter - my first in the wild. We arrived at our hotel that evening and collapsed with room service and television. Day 2 was a challenging 21 miles and we made an early start. After porridge and pancakes, we headed north east in a downpour. Our feet were taped in preparation for the long day and after hours of pounding the pavements we sheltered from pouring rain in a cafe in Stantead Abbotts. After a much needed loo stop and a quick change out of our wet clothes, we re-strapped our soggy feet and headed out. Eventually that afternoon we reached green fields and winding footpaths and the sun made a welcomed appearance. We arrived tired and very achy in the prettiest village of Anstey and checked in to our B&B. Then with the flare and magic of a conjuror, in moments we were washed and changed and ready to go out for for a pub dinner with a friend who had driven to meet us. That night I lay in my crisp soft bed rubbing biofreeze into a mysterious quasimodo hump that had appeared on my right shoulder.

Day 3 we slept till a blissful 8am and after rubbing soothing foot lotion into my back (it seemed to help) and using a fleece to cushion my hump from the straps of my backpack, we headed in the direction of Arington to stay with friends for the night. That day was not the hardest in terms of mileage and our feet held up well, but somehow our packs were getting heavier and our backs ached. Suddenly I felt a great wave of respect for Eddie the god Izzard - we weren't

after all running to Norfolk! The sun shone on us all day and we arrived tired but happy. Our friends opened a fine bottle of wine and fed us giants plates of carbs and then washed and dried all our clothes!

The next day, clean and well fed, we set out East along the Wimpole Way. The route took us into Cambridge and out the other side to Anglesy Abbey and to Quy Mill. A tough 18,5 miles but the sun shone and we stopped to eat our lunch in a glorious spot looking over fields and woods and a perfect blue sky and a sign which read: "Danger. Do not touch any military debris. It may explode and kill you". We survived lunch and moved on towards Cambridge. After a very pleasant urban latte stop, we headed out of the city to our next resting place. Once checked in to our hotel, we took it in turns to sit in a freezing bath for 15 mins (a top tip from Eddie) - it repairs the damage in your calf muscles but it does make you scream and cry out in the process. After our torturous bath - we headed to the hotel spa - Yes they had a spa! And I sat in the sauna for an hour- mostly so I could defrost. After a spectacular meal we fell into bed.

Day 5 we were up and out early heading north east to Ely up the River Cam. I was hoping to see wildlife, but not perhaps the bears and mountain lions Bill the Wild Man Bryson dealt with on his walks. Sun and rain all day. I fell down a badger sett, was nipped by ants, bullied by horned cows and I was losing a toe nail. We finally arrived in Ely muddy, wet and tired. That night we were staying in a very grand B&B and arrived so bedraggled that we undressed in the porch so as not to damage the white furniture and white carpets. That evening we tended our blisters. The most efficient and painless way to tackle a blister is to take a needle and thread (any colour thread will do) and gently push the needle through the bottom of the blister and very carefully push it through and out the other end, taking the thread with you. With a pair of scissors cut the thread, freeing the needle and you are left with a piece of thread running through the

middle of your blister, top to bottom. Very quickly the blister will drain out along the thread, dry out and eventually the dead skin, with thread, will drop off. In this way, there is no pressure, no wound, no infection, no pain.

Day 6 was all about Rivers - after a peak at the magnificent cathedral we walked east through the Fen country to Feltwell. We followed the River Lark in glorious sunshine, we crossed the Little Ouse and in every field, tractors were busy at harvest time. It is wonderful to know that two people can walk for several hours through the landscapes of this small and crowded island without meeting another person. A strangely satisfying Chinese takeaway was supper in our little B&B that night and then to bed.

Day 7 was another perfect morning. We were still moving north east through the land and it was strange to think that before cars, unless you had a horse, this is how folk would have travelled from a to b. The plan was to walk to Oxburgh Hall and then up to Swaffham where we were meeting pals for a meal that night. The day went horribly wrong when the footpath came to an abrupt end at a river. There was no way over so we decided to go off-piste to try and get back on to our route. We ended up scrabbling through hedgerows, climbing barbed wire fences and hiking across sheep fields. It was a two hour detour. What had started as an idyllic day following a meandering river where we saw darting kingfisher and deer gamboling on the path ahead, turned into an 11 hour slog. When we finally arrived in Swaffham that evening we were revived by our lovely friends rubbing comfrey oil into our feet! Day 8 we were heading to the village of Brisley. At 14.5 miles, it was the shortest day but it was a big struggle because we started out exhausted. Just putting one foot in front of the other seemed difficult. The day was not about landscape but just about keeping going. I repeated a mantra over and over and over to myself: "9 miles, becomes 7, becomes 5, becomes 3, becomes none. 9 miles becomes 7, becomes 5,

becomes 3 , becomes none"; and so on. I started doing breathing exercises and counting trees, anything to take my mind off the walk. When we did arrive at our charming B&B, we were so tired that we couldn't even manage the few meters walk to the local pub for supper... So we stayed in, watched tv and ate cereal bars we had in our backpacks and dined on nuts, fruit and biscuits and drank the little bottles of wine provided by the thoughtful owners.

Day 9 - the last day, was a punishing 18+ miles. We were joined for the big push home by our enthusiastic friend, who turned up bright and breezy at the B&B first thing. His fabulous and generous wife took anything we didn't need, including our dirty clothes, bundled it all into her car and drove off, leaving us ecstatically light and free and as if walking on air. We made it home to High Kelling at 6pm on Saturday 21 August to an amazing welcoming party. Friends and children with banners and flags and a finishing line that we duly ran through. Chilled champagne was thrust into our hands - the reception was overwhelming.

We raised our glasses to Alice who had died on this day nine years before and I couldn't help thinking that this was just the sort of adventure she would have loved. Perhaps in another time, in different circumstances or in a different life this might have been a walk we could have done together...

Sophie