

St Peter's Way in a Day, Saturday 25th August 2018

Anything before 5 o'clock in the morning is 'silly o'clock' (unless you are a baker or a milkman) I thought as I set my alarm for 1.30am. But this was a special occasion, and this time tomorrow I will have completed St Peter's Way!

We gathered at Chipping Ongar for a 4am start, and led by Mick Lane, 28 of us set off, head torches bobbing in the dark. There were quite a few from our own group, including some 'first-timers', several from Norfolk & Suffolk, and others from around the country who wanted to do the walk for various reasons. One person had travelled from Sevenoaks as he had always wanted to do St Peter's Way. Anita, who organised the event, was amazed as the numbers have declined in the last few years, but for some reason this year proved very popular and she had to book two minibuses to accommodate us.

St Peter's Way crosses Essex largely due east from the small town of Chipping Ongar. The Way is one of the trails first published by Fred Matthews and Harry Bitten of West Essex Ramblers, who considered it to be 'the finest [long-distance path in Essex] for variety and atmosphere', citing as example Hanningfield reservoir and the views from Purleigh Hill. And of the trail's end-point, they say: "To arrive here, isolated but not lonely, with the colours which abound on the marsh and the call of the birds, is to appreciate why Essex, although it has not the grandeur of the Pennines or the Lake District, is such a beautiful county and such a happy place for walking."

The early start was worth it; walking into the dawn and watching the sky turn from black to silver, to shades of pink, orange and blue was magical, as we made our way to the first stop after 10 miles at Margareting, where the owner had kindly offered us use of the loos.

After what seemed like no time at all, we arrived at the village hall in Stock in bright sunshine to be greeted by Anita and John who had organised a great breakfast of cereals, fruit, tea and coffee, and the famous bacon butties. Breakfast was served by Mick Dodge and Bill Bowers, and was eagerly enjoyed by all.



Ready to go again after the wonderful breakfast stop

Much refreshed by breakfast, we went on, passing the famous windmill at Stock. Stock Windmill is a Grade II listed tower mill, built around 1804. The mill has four patent sails, a boat-shaped cap, a six-bladed fantail and three pairs of overdrift (operated from above) millstones. It is in working order and is worked occasionally, turning 360 degrees to catch changing winds. Built in the heyday of wheat farming and high corn prices, there were once three mills on this site, run by the village baker. A steam engine was added to the mill in 1902. The mill used wind power up until 1930, then ran for a further six years using an internal combustion engine. Essex County Council bought the mill in 1945. Repairs began in 1991, part-funded by English Heritage and involving Friends of Stock Tower Mill, restoring the mill to working order.

The walk continued down an old road, Seamans Lane. This road was converted into a bridleway when the construction of the reservoir severed it. Work started in 1951 to build the reservoir in the Sandon Valley, covering the hamlet of Peasdown. There is a local myth that says the village is still intact under the water! Despite being man-made, the reservoir has become home to some amazing wildlife. There are 250 acres of conservation woodland and it has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notable for its colonies of breeding ducks



East Hanningfield village was our next point, with a welcome village shop for provisions. We then passed Bicknacre and crossed the vineyards on the way to Purleigh. Established in 1969 by the Greenwood family, Purleigh vineyard is one of the oldest wine producers in England. We were able to see bunches of grapes maturing on the vines.

Our lunch stop at 28 miles was in the village of Purleigh where The Bell pub has been welcoming people since the 14th century. It is set in Purleigh's small conservation area with the church and original village buildings on top of the hill overlooking the Blackwater estuary. The weather was glorious so some of us sat in the churchyard in the sunshine while others went to the pub.

John and Anita were at the pub to greet us and offer support and encouragement! After a well-earned lunch, Mick handed over the leader's role to Ginny who had kindly offered to take over to the tea stop to give Mick a break. Ginny looked very fresh, following her son's wedding the day before and a late night, and the following day she was doing the White Cliffs 50 mile challenge, so offering to lead us was greatly appreciated!

Jean [Bowers] was our wonderful backmarker for the whole day, making sure that no one was left behind or lost (we did lose someone temporarily but found him again!) and Jean was joined by Richard [Haynes] who also kept an eye on us. Bill [Bowers] was brilliant, our Super Support Star, meeting us throughout the day with top-up water and taking our extra gear from point to point so we didn't have to carry it.



During the sunny afternoon, which was quite hot at times, Ginny arranged a drinks stop at Mundon Parish Church of St Mary. This is an extraordinary Grade I listed monument delicately restored by the Friends of Friendless Churches with the help of English Heritage. The afternoon continued mostly in warm sunshine with just a brief rain shower before we reached the tea stop at Steeple. Once again we were spoilt by Anita and John who provided a selection of delicious home-made cakes (John's fruit cake is famous, and rightly so!) as well as tea, coffee and soft drinks.

When we set off again, someone said 'only another 10 miles to go...' and I thought I don't want to think about that, I just want to keep going and reach the chapel!!

We were now getting close to the Essex sea-wall at Mundon Creek, and the marina at Maylandsea is one of many on the county's coastline. Soon we were on Bradwell Marshes and the landscape became increasingly desolate as we approached the sea, and the wind freshened. For its last two miles, the Way heads north by the sea-wall, the saltmarsh stretching out far to the east, with the chapel visible in the distance. Many people say that for the last five miles the chapel doesn't seem to get any closer, and I think some people certainly felt that way!

The chapel of St Peter on the Wall was built in 654 by Lindisfarne monk St Cedd, using the Kentish ragstone of an earlier Roman fort (Othona) on the site. Cedd became an important figure at the Council of Whitby, which adjudicated on the form of worship in post-Roman Britain. The chapel fell out of religious use in the 18th century and was used as a grain store, but was restored in 1920 and is today a regular site of summer pilgrimage.

We arrived at the chapel around 7pm, where Anita and John were there to welcome us 'home' and we assembled for a group photo in the failing light. We then made our way to the minibuses which were waiting to take us back to Chipping Ongar and then went our separate ways for the journey home.

It was a long day and I was not confident about completing the walk, but with a lot of encouragement and support (mainly from Jean), I did, and I was very pleased!



It was a wonderful day, brilliantly organised and supported by Anita, John, Jean and Bill, Mick and Ginny, and I am sure all of us who took part would like to say a big thank you to all.

Philip Hull

St Peter's Way in a day

I'm a runner or so I tell people. Really I'm someone who plods around marathons and sometimes goes a bit further. Having completed several LDWA Challenge events, I quickly signed up and became a member. A friend then suggested we do this group walk as a recce for the St Peter's Way Ultra in February 2019.

I was apprehensive about doing the group walk as I'm not the fastest walker and did worry about being too slow. The 4am start wasn't that appealing either but I put on my big girl pants, signed up, booked the Travelodge and found myself in a lorry car park at 3.45am trying to find my head torch.

In the first couple of hours I soon found myself thinking about buying a whole new walking wardrobe. As my feet got progressively wetter from the recent rain and morning dew I thought about my lovely walking boots that have never seen a decent walk and did wonder how I would fare over the next few hours. But then the sun came up and there we were in the middle of the beautiful Essex countryside and somehow all was well with the world.

The day for me got better and better. Bacon rolls and coffee at the breakfast stop and a hug from the lovely Mick Dodge. What more could a girl ask for? We had several stops, one at a shop where I was able to buy a sandwich for my lunch and a stop at the pub where I had a much needed cappuccino and ate my lunch. We strolled through a vineyard and stopped for afternoon tea where there were delicious cakes and more coffee or tea. All that food!!! It was like being in a Famous Five book; all we needed was lashings of ginger beer.

The whole day was relaxed and friendly and I had the opportunity to chat to a couple of the other walkers as well as my friends. I'm not the most social person but 40 odd miles tends to make you start chatting to people you don't know. We arrived at the church at around 7.30pm and I feel rather proud to be in the group photo. My next ambition is be in the strider magazine (I'll feel like a proper walker then).



Fran & Susan relaxing en route

The coach back to the start had us chatting some more and I got a fit of the giggles: what better way to end the day. I would definitely recommend this to anyone who likes walking and there is so much more I could say about the beauty of the walk but I think you should do it and see for yourself what a lovely time can be had. I have a feeling you'll be seeing me again.

Fran Thorn