

LONG DISTANCE WALKERS ASSOCIATION – Kent Group

furthering the interests of those who enjoy long distance walking

NEWSLETTER



First stop on the EBB social walk, 10 September 2023 (see page 12)



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WELCOME to the December 2023 edition of the Kent Group Newsletter. We wish all members a safe and happy festive season!

Cathy Waters

KENT GROUP COMMITTEE

Chair	Peter Jull	kent@ldwa.org.uk
Secretary	Helen Strong	secretary.kent@ldwa.org.uk
Treasurer	Jim Briggs	treasurer.kent@ldwa.org.uk
Groups/Social Walks Organiser	Peter Jull	walks.kent@ldwa.org.uk
Newsletter Editor	Cathy Waters	newsletter.kent@ldwa.org.uk
Membership Secretary	David Thornton	membership.kent@ldwa.org.uk
Other Committee Members	Nicola Foad, Stephanie Le Men, Penny Southern	
Life President (non-Committee)	Brian Buttifant	
Web Master (non-Committee)	Michael Headley	website.kent@ldwa.org.uk

KENT GROUP AGM 2024 – ANNOUNCEMENT

From Helen Strong

The venue for the 2024 AGM will be Godmersham and Crundale Village Hall, Canterbury Rd, Godmersham CT4 7DR. It's on the A28 between the M20 and A2.

As usual, we will have a short walk of around 7 miles starting from the hall car park at 10am. Lunch will be served from 12:30pm and the AGM will start promptly at 1:30pm.

Please put this date into your diaries. If you intend to join us for any part of the day – be that the walk, the lunch, and the AGM – then please email secretary.kent@ldwa.org.uk and I will add you to the list.

It is useful to have a list of participants for the walk, but **lunch must be booked in advance**, as this is made off-site, and I have to give that number to the catering team well in advance. I will send out another email message to all members nearer the time, with the minutes from last year's AGM. The last two years have been well attended by our members, so we look forward to seeing you at the

AGM if you can make it.



Cap Blanc-Nez, summer walk in the Pas de Calais, 24 August



Otford and Oldbury, 12 November 2023

СЛАВА УКРАЇНИ (SLAVA UKRAINE)

From Peter Jull

An auspicious start. Got stopped at Stansted security, the Xray having revealed something dodgy in my bag – fig rolls! Having seen the packets they still swabbed one for drugs/explosives.



PL-SK-UA

As I leave the hotel a familiar looking bunch are gathering outside the station. The road from Kosice must have had 10-12 sets of roadworks with long lights delays and a detour which landed me in the local Tesco's car park. The weather forecast was sunny with possible afternoon thunder showers; the actual weather was rain all the way there. At least, because of the delays, by the time I got to the trail head at Nova Sedlice it had subsided to spits. Starting up a track, after 600 yards, find a red/white arrow pointing off as expected. Someone's recorded the route with a head cam and uploaded it to Street View so I've had a preview of what to expect although it was 9 years old. But Google disguises reality and I find within 10 minutes that I'm dripping with perspiration and within 15 minutes I'm having to stop for heart rate reducing breathers as it's so steep. Glimpses of sky through the trees suggest a top might be near, but that proves just as illusory as that rainbow-ending pot of gold as red/white

marks lead higher and higher.

Reach a junction with signs which indicate another 400m to climb to the top of target Kremenc. But the arrow points to a path leading down. Substantial running water is heard but invisible. The path zigzags down to what on Google looked little more than a trickle but rain fed today is roaring lustily.



There is a footbridge though. Start to regain that height lost and then eat into that 400m. The dripping that had been difficult to identify as new rain or old rain dripping from leaf to leaf became more obviously more rain. That pot of gold looked less illusory when there was a brightening where trees have been cleared along the border. But the target tripoint is a little way to the left and when 'we are nearly there' expectations have kicked in that last little bit is sadistically steep. Have to invade Ukraine prematurely to get round a fallen tree and then I really am there. 3000ft of ascending in 4½ miles. Enter Poland to use the picnic benches they've put there. Enter Ukraine to get the photographic evidence that I've really been there although it's now rather foggy. And then start down again but notice that the Polish information board has some pretty pictures of bears in these woods – disconcerting. However the only fauna I've seen all day is a black and bright yellow lizard creeping into a crevice, a couple of birds and a particularly sticky slug-type thing that had attached itself to my water bottle. Perhaps I should include four men coming down that I passed a couple of miles after I'd started up. Apart from that all I've seen is lots of trees close up and an occasional glimpse of more trees not quite so close up. Although the map had marked many paths in the woods, none were signed or visible on the ground so it was the same way down as up which was uneventful and unremarkable except it was 1¼ hours quicker. So not the most visually interesting route but it served its purpose and target I complete.



HU-SK-UA

I've never discerned whether parking on the roadside in eastern Europe is illegal or just not the done thing, so finding somewhere to start a walk is always a challenge. In Cierne nad Tisou I'd picked out a space either where workers at a railway marshaling yard park or a cemetery. On arrival the cemetery felt more comfortable. Start into the village and turn across a long footbridge over said railway yard. Half a mile of empty coal-wagons trundle underneath in the direction of Ukraine. Reach a road and two men in uniform stop to talk – Slovak police. A picture of yesterday's tripoint helps the broken English understanding of where I plan to go. They don't want me to go down to the Ukrainian border and walk along to the tripoint but they're happy for me to approach along the Hungarian border which was the way I'd planned to come back. So a circular walk becomes there and back again (again) with extra road walking. A small walking group passes the other way but 'good mornings' are responded to in Slovak so I learn no more. The actual weather is matching the forecast, dry and sunny with a little bit of cloud, low 20s. Easy enough navigation, all hard surface apart from the last stretch of field-edge track. The border is obvious from a line of security cameras. Makes me more self-conscious about entering Ukraine this time but I put a foot or two surreptitiously in and picnic riverside in Slovakia. The actual tripoint is in the river Tisou which is really wide. Turning back I meet a couple who ask for confirmation they're going the right way. I don't think what I



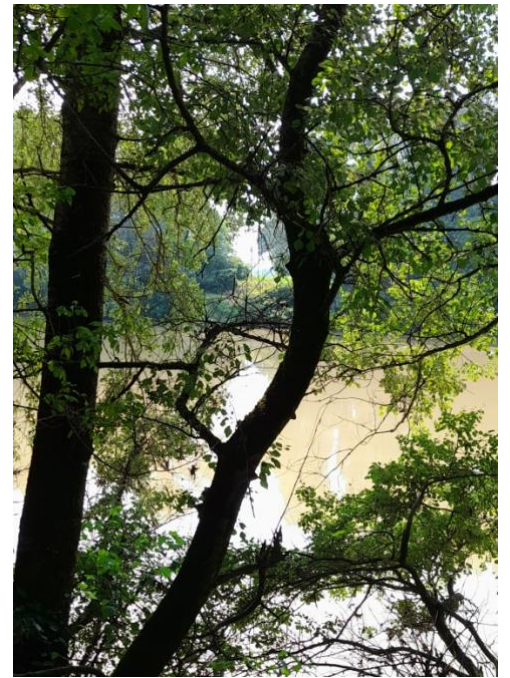
could tell them added any helpful understanding. Their car is in a large parking space (so large a father is giving son driving lessons in it) which I could have used had I known, instead of tramping back for a couple of hours. But what would I have done for the rest of the day? The way back was uneventful and unremarkable, just less interesting as I'd seen it all before. The highlight was a dead snake in the road. 13 miles in 5 hours 10 with no discernible ascent.

Next task is to get to the other side of the river. Starting off I'm soon stalled at a level crossing with the back

end of a freight train stopped across it while entering that railway yard. Serendipitously some of the wagons belong to a Ukrainian iron mine which I'd invested a little bit of money in (worth rather less now thanks to Putin) so perhaps I owned a nut and bolt or two in them. Then pass two cyclists coming back from the way I'd wanted to walk – hrmph. Crossing into Hungary is just a line in the road, crossing the river is via a rickety old ferry operated by two rickety old men.



Find some parking next to a picnic bench next to a cycle path atop a flood embankment. Follow the cycle path and where it comes closest to the river take a promising bear left. But it turns in the wrong direction so retrace and try again a bit further along. This time there is a path beside the river, sometimes clear, sometimes barely discernible. Nearly comes to an end at a steep gully but recent-looking footprints have made it, so why not me? Break out the walking pole though. After 700 yards of semi bushwhacking, find a bench with a view of the river and I can see the Slovakian security cameras. But GPS says I'm not yet opposite Ukraine, so go on until I'm past but with no good view. Go back a bit but the river bank is steep and deep and



soft so can't get a leaf-free view. The path is now better, tyre tracks even, so choose to go on to the end of the wood where it should rejoin the cycle track. Not in the plan but what else would I do all day? Pass a lone lady hiker who barely responds to 'hello'. Insects nibbling on my arms are becoming a bugbear so when I happen upon a track leading away from the river, I take it. Saunter back along a bug-free cycle track. Pass several people who are studiously avoiding eye contact; I wonder why. 4½ miles in 2½ hours had its merits over the morning walk but also demerits (bugs). If this is what Scottish midges are like I'm not going.

RO-SK-UA

Park by the church in Mehtelek. Start down a track leading to another track, atop a flood embankment. Through a village and out the other side down a straight lane. Pass



a car containing two young men in uniform who want to talk – Hungarian police. After an interrogation about where I'm from and where I'm going they're happy for me to continue. They seemed more concerned about a Ukrainian van parked 50 yards ahead. Cross a river bridge and turn onto a cycle path the Hungarians have built (with EU money) atop a floodbank, to presumably encourage people to go to this tripoint. A flock of sheep across the path parts to let me pass. Arrive after 1¼ hours to realise I've made an error in planning; what am I going to do for the rest of the day, even though the route back is a little longer? Take a selfie to prove I've been into Ukraine – again. Again the actual tripoint is in the middle of the river, smaller this time. Sit in the shade for a while on an older marker which suggests Turkey ended here sometime in the past. Back along the cycle path and cross the bridge and turn onto another cycle path atop a floodbank. Reach the Romanian border which has a barrier and no-entry sign. It's a traffic type so postulate it means vehicles not pedestrians and I'm British so can't understand the Hungarian words. The cycle path continues but weedy now. At a junction a Romanian sign is more obviously translatable as 'Access forbidden frontier zone'. My bravado is trumped by discretion and I abandon plans to look for a path into the woods to where the riverbank is opposite the Hungarian/Ukraine border, content that the tripoint challenge has been effectively met. And the

nibbles from yesterday are turning yellow and red and swelling and throbbing at times so riverside woods have lost their appeal. Retreat into Hungary, turn onto another cycle path atop a floodbank which leads to tracks atop floodbanks looping back to the village by a different route. Spinning 9½ miles out for 4 hours under a scorching sun feels no less wearying than if I'd gotten a move on. Lunch on a bench in the churchyard in the shadow of the tower. Give up contemplating what else I might do for the rest of the day and drive on to spend too much time in hotel town Nyiregyhaza, which who can guess how it should be pronounced.

Hungary's highest



At 3330ft Kekes is the highest mountain in Hungary and you can drive to within 5 minutes' walk of the top, but that would be cheating and what would I do with the rest of the day? Better planning would have used yesterday's spare hours driving much of the 2 hours to Markaz at the bottom of the mountain to start earlier than 9am. Start up village streets, more ascent in 2 minutes than the previous two days. Becomes a footpath marked with green L on white. Reach a crossing track, neither direction of which seems to match my planned route or map. Choose wrong, track runs out and I end up pushing through scratchy scrub towards the planned path. Arrow on screen crosses the line with nothing visible on the ground but soon reaches a track which is at least walkable even if not going in the best direction. Crosses a mountain stream so take the opportunity to drink, drench and refill. Becomes steeper and rougher after turning away from the stream. Joins a better forester's track which matches the map and winds around the end of the stream and several of its babies. Eventually reach a track junction which almost turns back the way just come, but at a higher level. Soon spot a sign which says 4km to the top in the direction of blue and white arrow. A few yards further and blue/white mark on tree identifies footpath off the track. Get a glimpse of the TV tower which sits atop the mountain. The number and colours of signs multiply as I get nearer, presumably for people following routes from the top. After relatively gentle ascending much of the last ½ mile feels cruelly steep and then I'm there, but I'm not because the path leads all the way round the back of the TV tower compound and then I am there. Less than 4 miles as the crow flies has become 9 with all the winds.

A teenager fixated by her phone is plonked on the marker point the whole time I am there so she's in the picture. School trips and granny trips have taken the easy option. Thoughts of a leisurely lunch are off the menu as it's been nearly 5 hours to ascend 2800ft and I need to get back down for a long drive to the next day's big climb. Paths on map missing on the ground also banish thoughts of trying an alternative route down. So it's there and back again (again), apart from the scratchy scrub bit. The descent was uneventful and unremarkable except it took one hour less.



Poland's highest

€150 a night to stay by the lake and free parking or 10 miles away for ¼ of that and €10 parking, no contest. On the approach drive there is snow visible on them there mountains – ominous. But the road climbs up and up and the starting point is higher than I climbed to yesterday. A display map in the lake/ski resort Strbske Pleso says I need a red path and signs say at 5:50 in the morning it's 13° and



4½ hours to Rysy. Reckon targeting midday will do me as I've maximized available daylight hours. Red/white marks identify a path which is rooty/bouldery but footfall is easy without breaking a stride pattern. Climb above ski jumps seen across the valley and away from the valley river where the quietude is only birds making the noises birds make in woods. But that is soon disturbed by the chatter of the first of many overtakers. Pass a water spout but don't refill as I'm carrying more water than I've ever carried on a walk before. A footbridge crosses a river with more water than anyone could drink. Reach a path junction from where Rysy is blue and white but my time taken is twice what the time to top has reduced

by. I'd better stop being so leisurely. Reach the next path junction in the time that signs suggest even though I've been overtaken by an 8 year old and his granny. Above the treeline now, Rysy is red and white again and the first patch of snow is crossed. Although the path is clearly managed by the park authorities, more careful footfall is definitely required as it zigzags up towards a rock wall. And then the snow really begins. Traversing from rocky patch to rocks at first but people ahead are looking uncertain which way to go. Some go up a snowy slope 1:2 or steeper. I climb some adjacent scree to regain the zigzag path. And then there's fixed chains to cling on to and ladders. It gets better briefly with large stable boulders to step across, but then more and steep snow. People with crampons on are bottoms sliding.



A hut hoves into view with a sign that says Rysy 45 minutes. Not for me, not in these conditions, because all of the route I can see is snow. I go a little further, past a sign sticking out of the snow which inexplicably says no stilettos and try some steps down. I'm going to be slow, my slow midday to the top is nigh, and the darkened sky starts to spit blobs. Having turned back on the north-facing Polish side because of snow some years before, I'd hoped the south-facing Slovak side would be clearer, even though the higher paths only officially re-opened to the public the week before. Turn back again. On the steeper snow, slip into an involuntary bottom slide but feet facing down catch a rock to stop. Survive those chains and ladders, scarier going down than up. Steep scree looks harder going down than steep snow until another slip starts another bottom slide, speed increasing worryingly quickly. After an ungainly stop I manage to reverse traverse but twice the pole sinks so deep in snow it comes out without its rubber end which has to be dug out. Back on the visible path, rocks make the zigs and zags slow going. I had noticed some people going up and down with large wooden back panniers. Back at the first path junction there is a pile of them next to a small shelter with a pile of bags which I'd spotted before but now work out that the sign's Slovak words mean that if you carry a 10kg load up to the hut you get a free cup of tea. One has a big Calor gas cylinder attached ready to go. Must be the hardest-earned cup of tea ever. The route was there and back again (again) but the descent was not uneventful and took as long going down as up. On rocky paths I am too wary of deep steps down which can jar a vulnerable back. 3100ft of ascent in <5 miles, barely more than Day 1, but the snow and rocks underfoot made it so much harder.



Last Day



With a whole day until the evening flight home what shall I do? Map-looking for something interesting on the way to the airport, pick out a waterfall tourist attraction. And then a free parking spot at a rural railway station near the bottom of a path up. Cross the road onto a foot/cycle path set back from a main road – they do that a lot here. A five-lady walking group ponders a display map of local hiking routes. They disappear up someone's drive, while I take right path. A grassy path which is a joy after yesterday, a day for which my legs are yet to forgive me. Too soon it joins another rocky path. The river is cascading beside the path but trees only allow occasional good viewpoints. A 7 year old and her granny overtake. Reach a viewing platform with a view of where the river is more waterfally, but the path gradient increases to match. People are getting more plentiful and reach a path-junction mountain hut which is crowded, including a primary school party. (I think they must have used a mountain railway with a top station just over a ridge.) Choose a footbridge across the river beyond which the path is of boulders manipulated to flat side up which is welcome. More youngster groups abound. A footbridge crosses a side stream which is a proper precipice of a waterfall with spray but not the torrent volume just left behind. Hut supplies walk the other way. Reach another path junction and a few yards further on a larger hut is heaving at midday. Goulash like no other goulash encountered is filling and the system of numbered tickets is fine when the counter lady explains in English, but falls down when the food arrives with shouts of 69 in

Slovak. Only silly local beer on sale which pours with such a froth they spend 5 minutes waiting for it to settle or spooning it out so they can finish filling the glass. Follow the red path sign to the lake, which on the map, looked like it contoured round the edge of the mountain but climbs relentlessly and is relentless boulders. Eventually the cable car comes into view but the path climbs on, the boulders go on. What was hoped to be a nice descent down a grass ski slope turns out to be gravelly at best before





tapes divert off onto more bouldery path. Back on the gravelly slope a slip turns into a tumble which hurts rather more than on snow. More boulder path before a gravel track which becomes grassy as the gradient eases before the cable car station. And then the bliss of a tarmac road winding comfortably down to the village. At last a route that has no there-and-back-again bits. Just a mile along that cycle track to the station and the walking part of this newsletter research trip is done. And the annual challenge of not meeting another Brit between leaving the airport and getting back is also completed.

THE HEBRIDEAN WAY – 10-21 July 2023

From Helen Strong

Having racked up a fair few miles between us on various trails across mainland Scotland, David and I had both longed to visit the Scottish isles, and in particular the Outer Hebrides to complete the Hebridean Way. We had both heard good things about the Outer Hebrides from friends and neighbours who told us that the islands are not plagued with midges in the summer – so we decided to go in July.

We started planning the trip in the Christmas holidays. It was lovely to have this to look forward to during all those dark winter months, and surprising how quickly the first half of the year seemed to fly by – early July was soon upon us. The Heb Way is 150 miles from Vatersay island to Stornoway on the island of Lewis, about 9-10 days walking.

Planning this long distance walking trip was not without its struggles. As the Heb Way overview on Walk Highlands notes, accommodation can be sparse and supplies not easy to come by along the way. We used a variety of accommodation – from simple, cheap hostels to cosy, self-catering Airbnb's, and one particularly eye-wateringly overpriced 'traditional' B&B. There is little choice for walkers – especially on Harris, but more of that story to follow.

As we chose to complete the route in July, we hoped we would be blessed with warm and sunny weather for much of the trip and, generally speaking, the weather was perfect for walking. As I said, midges are generally not a problem owing to the prevailing winds. However, these were not the only wee beasties we encountered. I'm talking about 'cleggs', a Scottish horsefly which has the capacity to bite through a layer of thick socks and leggings. Close fitting clothing is a no-no – a baggy pair of trousers are what's required. Smidge, my usual go-to insect repellent on Scottish turf, was simply not cutting it on this occasion. Despite covering my skin with it, then covering my skin with clothes soaked in Smidge, as soon as the sun came out I was under attack. The bites developed into huge painful and itchy wheals which took days to abate and this was a nuisance. Thank goodness for antihistamines (I hope you are writing a list of necessities).

On Monday 10th July, we caught the train from West Malling to Victoria then up to Euston, to catch the Caledonian overnight sleeper. We struggled to get into the unlocked couchette at first – but once in, we could relax.

After a decent night's sleep, we arrived in Glasgow about 7:30am and walked to Queen Street station to catch the 8.21 train to Oban. This was a lovely railway journey – David and I looked out of the window as we sped through Rannoch Moor and Bridge of Orchy and reminisced about our experiences on the WHW.



When we arrived in Oban, we decided to have a short walk about the busy harbour area to stretch the legs before catching the Ferry to the island of Barra, which was leaving at 13.10. The sea was calm, and we had a good crossing. After nearly five hours on that ship, we arrived in the tiny port of Castlebay, just before 6pm. We had booked to stay at the Durnard Lodge Hostel – a two minute walk from the ferry terminal overlooking this beautiful bay with a sandy cove in view across the water. The sun was shining and it was somewhat hard to believe we had travelled so far without too much stress. We enjoyed our home cooked dinner and decided to get our heads down.

We had a fairly early start as we had arranged a taxi to pick us up in the morning to take us to the start of the trail – from the visitor/community centre on Vatersay, the next island down, south of Barra. The taxi driver kindly took a photo of us, and we set off back along the road which we had just been driven along. As we walked over the causeway, we took the turning which headed off up over a pass, and at that point we felt we had started the trail 'proper'.

The climb was short – but it was nice to be off the tarmac. We had been told that there is a fair amount of hard surface on the trail and we would agree with that. Of course, there are pros and cons to tarmac, the main benefit being the speed

and therefore distance which can be covered in a day, which can be impressive. The downside is that pounding does rather take its toll on the feet and legs. This first section was one of the nicest and we walked 15 miles to reach the terminal at Air Mhor to catch a ferry to the small island of Eriskay. We wanted to catch the mid-afternoon sailing as we needed to pick up some supplies from the community shop in the village before it shut. Our Airbnb was very comfortable, and we had another stunning view as the evening sun hit the beaches on the shorelines visible across the island.

A quick note here about the ferry service in the Hebrides. David's neighbour had mentioned that CalMac ferries were struggling to provide a service and the local paper I read in Eriskay discussed the matter. I understood that the recent issues had been put down to a lack of investment and number of old vessels in their fleet, which meant there were fewer on the sea as they were in constant need of repair. Some of the locals had recently marched in Stornaway and the CEO had resigned, and although there were new vessels on order, these would not be in service for another 12-18 months or more. So, if you are travelling to the Hebrides, be aware that ferry issues are ongoing – we were so lucky to catch the ones we did, without delay throughout the trip. I am not sure what would have happened if we had been stranded.



After a peaceful sleep in Eriskay, we set off and were soon crossing another causeway on to the next island, South Uist. We had 26 miles to do that day and the majority of the morning was spent on the road. We followed the coast for 6 miles and then track for 3 and then the dunes and track for another 10 miles, heading inland at Drimsdale. My memories of this next section of South Uist are how flat and wet the west of the island is, while on the east stand large, imposing mountains which are supposedly impassable with sheer cliffs on the other side.

The trail then took us on a detour around a nature reserve. On the map this looks like a huge loch with a few small islands, but there was a discernible route on duckboards. This seemed to be the highlight of the day, but the duckboards soon ran out and then it became less easy to see where the path was going. We kept spotting and following the few white waymark posts, and we seemed to get across the boggy parts and reached the car park out of which we then headed back onto tarmac – back to the road we had left a few hundred yards behind. As we plodded towards our accommodation in West Gerinish, I was feeling particularly tired – perhaps partly due to the antihistamines I was taking for the nasty clegg bites on my ankles and legs.

We arrived a little later than scheduled, desperate for a cup of tea. Our hosts were very welcoming but, as is the way I find when I am particularly drained, they wanted to chat and it is not easy when all you can think about is how shattered you are feeling. They were kind enough to sell us a bottle of red wine though – there was nowhere to buy anything within walking distance, and we were grateful they agreed to comply with our request.

On Friday 14 July we set off after a cooked breakfast. I know David has regretted sitting down and eating a full English before setting off for a day's walk – so we usually decline the invitation the night before, requesting a takeaway breakfast. But on this occasion our nice host was insistent, and we only had 15 miles to cover that day, so we agreed. Even then, you can lose a good hour of walking time if you agree, but here's the dilemma. The host is insistent that you have a good meal, but above this they enjoy cooking it and invariably like to watch you eat it. As you attempt to eat it, they engage you in long deep conversation – which slows the process up even more.

The morning's walk was nice, fairly flat and although there was some wind and some drizzle in the air, it was mild. We followed the trail up to a wind farm – it is amazing just how large those turbines really are – then down a few tracks and more road to then cross another causeway to North Uist. Once again hugging the coastal road and then on to the dunes as we neared the town of Balinvanich.

We finished the day walking along a small but pretty beach before turning in towards the town.

The hostess that evening was called Helen. We were staying in a room within her home. She was a keen baker and on arrival presented us with a selection of homemade cakes. As we had a second or third cup of tea in her kitchen, she was busy making some jams, and we had another slightly difficult conversation about what we would have for breakfast, but she agreed to give us something to take with us.

We were able to stock up with lunch supplies in the local shop and David popped back to pick up a cold bottle of prosecco before dinner – that night a Firepot meal. The hostess was heading out for the evening and just before we fired up our dinner, she offered us some pasta that she had made too much of, and we were grateful.



The forecast for the following morning was grim – it was going to be blowing a hoolie – the wind had changed direction so we would be walking straight into it.

Early the next morning, we set off with our packed breakfast (and sooo much of it) heading over the local highpoint of this part of North Uist. Before the ascent we stopped for breakfast and sat on the gravel to the side of an industrial building sheltered by the wind and rain – who said romance is dead? Onwards and up Ruabhail which was only 124m high, but it was quite an exhilarating climb, into the wind and rain, and when we reached the top, we took a photo at the trig point. As we headed down the other side, the weather began to abate and turned warm again, which bought the dreaded cleggs out to have another feed on my limbs. As we headed down off another high point, we could see the sun-filled beach and Benbecula airport in the distance – whose landing strip is the sandy shore. This was a wonderful view across the water and one which I will always remember. The rest of the



day was a mixture of long road sections interspersed with a couple of miles of flat cross-country track sections but these were peaceful and easy to follow. We then picked up the path as it runs along the A867 for 5 miles all the way to Lochmaddy. We had covered 22 miles but that last stretch on tarmac was tough on the feet and we were glad to arrive at our accommodation.

Once again, this host was generous in her offerings and although she was not cooking us breakfast, provided us with enough food for our lunch too – including some delicious local smoked salmon which we had with our prosecco aperitif. All this fine food and hospitality is a through-hiker's dream, especially when the shops are few and far between, and more importantly everything shuts on a Sunday – even the golf courses.

So, we got up on that Sunday morning to walk 10 miles to catch the 13.30 ferry from Berneray, to the next island of Harris – famous for tweed, and the books by Peter May, arriving at Leverburgh at 14.30. I mentioned the difficulties in finding accommodation on Harris... so, when planning to stay in the south of Harris, you may well struggle. The only accommodation seems to be an average-looking hotel for £300 a night or cottages for weekly bookings. After some searching, David came up with a stay at the Lingay House in Leverburgh. It was £130 a night, but we had little choice. We planned to get off the ferry, walk the 6 miles round the back of Leverburgh to Sgarasta Mhor, then make our way back to the B&B at the end of the day. Being Sunday, there were no buses, so David arranged with the landlord to pick us up that afternoon and be dropped off back to the trail the following morning (for which we were willing to pay).

Our stay at Lingay House was – shall we say – an interesting experience. The house is clean and tidy enough, but the facilities are incredibly basic for £130.00 per night. Prior to our stay, having been told there is nowhere open nearby to eat, we were offered the 'opportunity' to have a three-course meal cooked by the host for £30.00 per head, but we declined. We have our own methods of feeding ourselves adequately and at little expense when we need to – especially when the accommodation is priced so high. We were also offered packed lunch £10.00 per head, and you could ask for your flask to be filled with coffee... Now maybe we are mean – some people are happy to pay for these services – but coffee should be complimentary with such a high charge for accommodation. The way in which these were presented made us feel the landlord was cashing in wherever possible.

At the end of the afternoon, we reached the spot near where we had asked to be picked up and called the host to say we were on the road. After a few minutes his daughter arrived to pick us up. We were glad as it was starting to rain. 'We are just going to pick mum and the dog up from the beach – they're having a walk – is that ok?' she enquired.



Having made this short detour, we arrived at Lingay House and were greeted by the landlord who offered us tea and biscuits in the small lounge. There was no kettle in the bedroom – so we sat down and admired the scene from the window. The host boomed in to the lounge and began to tell us about the trail, how difficult the next section was – very boggy, apparently, and suggested we follow the coast road towards the pass – the Coffin Road. He was most insistent that we look at his map, despite the fact that David had his own OS map open on the floor. On and on he went about how people walk the Heb Way but struggle in the south of Harris – I got the feeling he thought we were walking newbies...

Anyhow, we managed to buy an overpriced bottle of red wine from him and had a comfortable night and a reasonable breakfast in the morning. I would have enjoyed my breakfast more, had I not been concerned about my middle finger (cleaning up a small red wine spill on the bedroom carpet, I snapped my extensor tendon) which was now bent, so I buddy-strapped it as we left the

house. The host's son (who is the supposed owner of the establishment, though it's clearly a family concern) dropped us back on the trail in his gardening van. To his credit, this was a lovely coastal road, but we were glad to get off the tarmac as we walked up the Coffin Road – which Walk Highlands describes as ‘the route used by pallbearers to carry the dead from the Bays district over to the west side of Harris for burial on the machair’ (boggy/grassy plains).

We were walking 20 miles in total that day and despite my injury I think this was one of the best days' walking we had. The weather was perfect – and we enjoyed walking over the undulating hills with beautiful views over the islands and bays. We were staying in Tarbert at the Backpackers Inn, and there was a small local supermarket for us to stock up on our supplies and buy something to cook a nice big hikers' meal – our favourite – pasta peperonata.

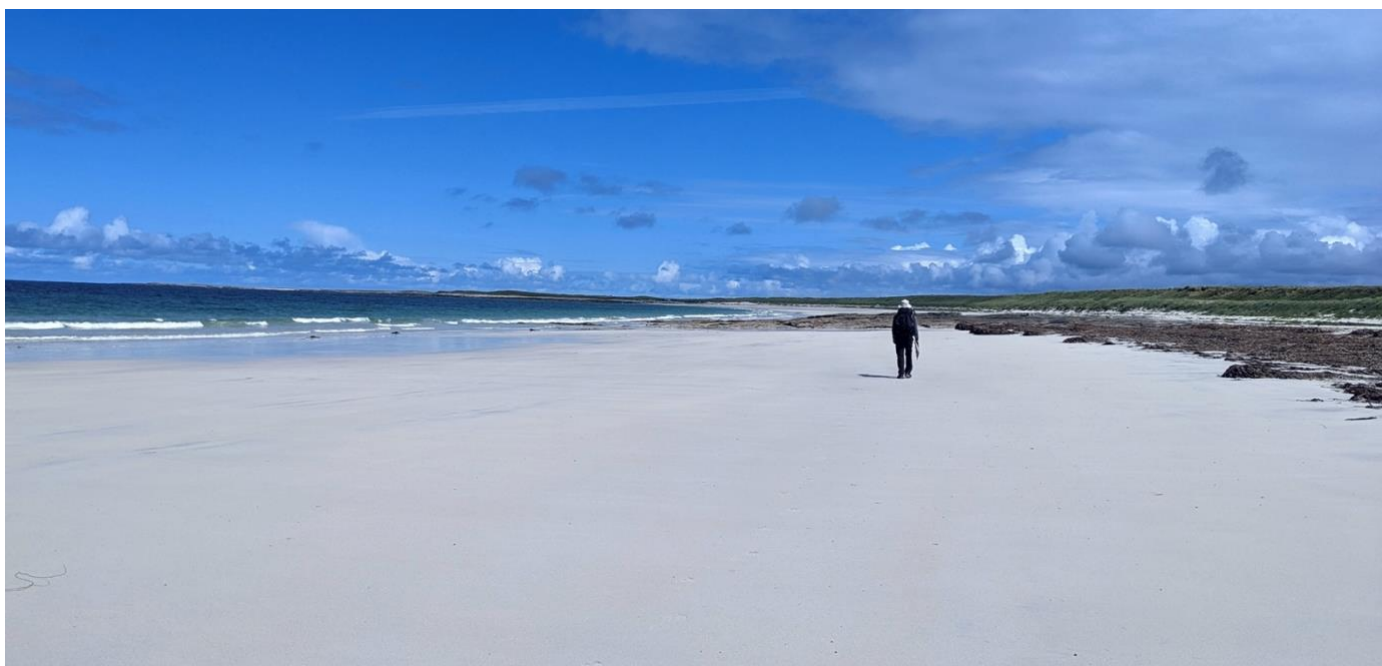
We were preparing dinner and I got talking to two friendly young women from London who were on a cycling holiday. I mentioned my finger incident and it just so happened they were both physiotherapists – one a sports physio. They took pity on me and redressed my finger – giving me the low down on what I should and shouldn't do – and gave me a whole roll of strapping to keep the finger buddy-strapped and straight as it wouldn't have a chance to heal otherwise.

It was Tuesday 18 July, and after seven day's walking and one more island to visit, we felt we were on the home straight. We had 20 miles to Balallan then we'd catch a bus to Stornoway where we were to be based for the next three nights. This was another lovely day's walk – less flat tarmac, more paths and passes, following a snaking track over boggy paths and through some wooded areas not that far from the main road and yet not actually on it, which made a change from some of the earlier days on the trail on Uist. Despite leaving early, we were struggling to keep time and ended up shortening the day slightly and catching the bus at an earlier stop as we were so near the road. As we sat on the bus into Stornoway, we were glad that we would have a comfortable stay with our own kitchen for a few days. It was nice being treated by hosts, fun and fortuitous meeting people in hostels, but we were looking forward to our own space and an opportunity to shop in a decent Co-op store!

The next day we took the bus back to the where we finished in Balallan, and walked 19 miles into Stornoway and the end of the trail. The morning involved walking across the moor which was as typical as Scottish moorland could be – heather-covered undulations and a fairly decent path – to Archamoor. The trail then takes the track (an old road) all the way to Stornoway – a last bit of tarmac, just to make sure that you have had plenty of the hard stuff under your feet. By this time I really had a mixture of emotions – glad we were nearly there, amazed we had walked a long way and rather sad that it was nearly all over. We found the plaque/monument at the end of the trail and headed back to the Airbnb for a well-deserved cup of tea.

The last day of our trip was originally planned to be a visit to the Butt of Lewis. However, in view of the fact that we had completed the trail and were both feeling a bit battered, we looked more carefully at the route from New Tolsta, known as the Heritage Trail. It soon became clear that this was not a trail which came highly recommended. Walk Highlands says ‘Apart from the minor roads at both ends, this route crosses very boggy moorland, regular waymarkers except stage 5/6. Appropriate footwear (flippers!) and navigation skills essential. Return by bus possible.’ With a bog factor 5/5 and a difficulty rating 3/3 it wasn't looking good, then some of the reviews below – one titled ‘An awful, dangerous and soul sucking drudge’ – sealed the decision to give that trail a miss and we went on a trip to the prehistoric Callanish stones instead.

So, on Fri 21 July, it was time to fly home from Stornoway to Heathrow via Glasgow. On the train home from Victoria, David read out an email he had received in response to the review of Lingay House we had left (which was neither cutting nor rude, but our opinion) yet the landlord now asked us to re-review it and increase his rating, as clearly, we hadn't been gushing enough! He only keeps the best reviews on his website, whereas other holiday review sites are a little more telling – both in the reviews and responses from the host.



Would we recommend a trip to the Outer Hebrides to complete the Heb Way? We would with the understanding that it is quite difficult to plan the accommodation, though there seem to be more small B&Bs along the way that did not come up in the web searches. There are campsites, but the prevailing winds would make that a challenge, and they are not always on the path, and wild camping would also be a challenge: I saw few spots where I thought it would be good to pitch and we didn't see any wild camping when we were there. The trail itself is tarmac-heavy in places, but the scenery is stunning when you are high and unlike any other place I have been to especially when you look down over the islands and beachy coves. We look forward to seeing more islands that Scotland can offer – the Skye trail for starters...

WALKING IN THE CYCLADES – PART 3 (continued from August 2023 Newsletter)

From Andrew Melling

Two years later, I planned a second holiday in the Cyclades but in September and to the island of Milos. Again, I booked a hotel in Piraeus but staying two nights on the return journey giving me a day to explore the town. The ferry crossing was not so smooth this time. My choice of ferry had been cancelled and I had been transferred to the 7.00 Fastcat meaning I had to get up at 5.30, having got to bed at 1.30. But the port was in chaos with many crossings cancelled because of high winds. Eventually, I got away at noon to arrive on Milos at 15.30, with time to settle in before my first waterside dinner.



Path to Trypiti



Roman theatre

Much of my walking was on roads, but the roads might have been called tracks anywhere else with very little traffic. I started the gentle ascent towards Plaka but soon descended to lovely Klima, looking for the roman theatre marked on the map. What might have been it was shrouded in vegetation with nothing to explore. After lunch I climbed back a bit and then down to quiet Schinopi before returning to my base at Adamas. Next day was a little yacht trip I had booked. There was a long wait after the appointed time but then I found myself in delightful company for a day of sailing, swimming, eating and drinking.

Friday was my fifth day in Adamas. On the first three days, there had been regular power cuts which seemed to be over but it was windy. I took the bus across the island to Pollonia, seeing some of the island's interior on the way. It is a pretty port village with water taxis crossing the short distance to the neighbouring island of Kimolos. A nice church looked out to a chapel across the bay to which I walked. The stony beach was not inviting. Lunch was behind plastic sheeting; it seemed that the wind was a constant companion.

Near Adamas was a mining museum, although the exhibits had more emphasis on the geology and pre-history of Milos. At lunch, I chatted to an Englishman of 84 who visited every year since his wife's stroke twenty years before for just one week. Latterly, his crown



Fyropotamos



Provatas

green bowling kept him too busy for longer holidays. I could not keep going to the same resort year after year. There is far too much else to see.

I walked up to Trypiti and followed signs down to where the roman theatre really was. The remains are very extensive and nearby is a massive 1st century complex of Christian catacombs, believed to have held 8,000 bodies. Moving on up to Plaka, I climbed to the Venetian castle of which only the low remains of the outer walls are left, but the views are amazing.

My second bus trip was south west to Paleochori with a nice beach and taverna. I was able to have a morning swim but after lunch the clouds brought thunder and lightning, and even rain for one minute. I stayed on my tiny balcony that evening, to feast on bread and cheese. There are few real hills on Milos and my next day's walk was a country stroll that might be had in East Anglia. I passed a fenced area signed as a wetland reserve but saw no sign of animal or bird life. Returning to the coast, I walked along the beach back to Adamas, meeting a lonely goose!

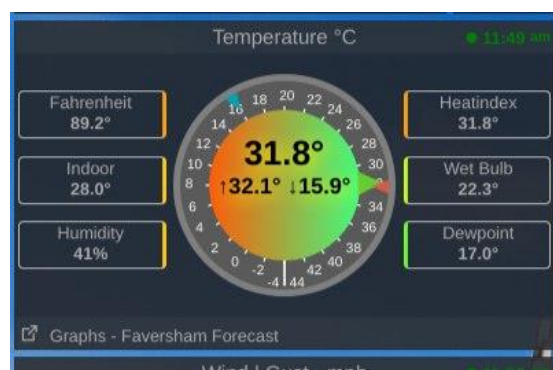
My last bus trip was to Provatas, another fine beach and restaurant. I enjoyed my morning on the beach but then! That holiday did not end so well. See Newsletter 110, December 2019.

ELEPHANT, BEAR & BULL (SOCIAL WALK) – 10 SEPTEMBER 2023

From Peter Jull

Looking for inspiration for a walk in eastern Kent, thoughts considered seeking out the wild bison recently released in Blean Woods, then extended to what else is associated with woods to extend the walk and landed on bear. Where to find a bear? A pub name; at which point thoughts jumped to Elephant, Bear & Bull. Attempts to connect three appropriately named country pubs with a 20-mile route failed, except in Faversham which had all three within a few hundred yards. So, with apologies to Michael Jones for plagiarising his walk name, Kent had its own 'Elephant, Bear & Bull' walk programmed, with two loops in and out of Faversham to make 18 miles.

What wasn't planned was for the day to fall during the extended September heatwave of temperatures exceeding 30°C with high humidity and a Met Office amber warning. But 11 started southward out of town and within minutes paused at **The Elephant** (see cover photo); one down. Further out, crossing the M2 bridge, sensibiles streamed underneath heading lemming-like towards Margate sands. Looping east, Boughton under Blean church was passed with the faithful's singing spilling out of the open door. On past the White Horse in Boughton village, the Three Horseshoes at Staplestreet to the Red Lion at Hernhill (also not yet open, honest) for a mid-morning break on the green. Flower festival ladies at the adjacent church invited us back for tea and cakes when they were ready. Round past Graveney (soon to be endless solar panels) and back past little Goodnestone church lead to Faversham Market Square to find **The Bear** for lunch.



The afternoon loop started past Shepherd Neame brewery and then beside Faversham Creek out on to the marshes following the England Coast Path. Shadeless, the sun at its peak, a gentle breeze was too warm to be of benefit. 3½ miles later, on reaching Oare, those that were wilting/burning took the opportunity to shortcut the 3 mile loop extension through Luddenham, by heading directly into town. They didn't miss **The Bull**, nor the sound of the really sensibiles splashing in the town's open air swimming pool on the back alley route returning to the cars. Our local resident Cathy Waters led the other three stalwarts round the full route to finish an hour later.

THE OUTER AYLESBURY RING – 27-29 OCTOBER 2023

From David Thornton

It had been my plan to do an article on the Wessex Ridgeway, from which I would have returned home yesterday, Monday 13 November. Unfortunately, during the summer I picked up a bit of plantar fasciitis which I was carefully nursing and slowly but successfully recovering from. However, it flared up quite badly, for no obvious reason, following a social walk on Sunday 22 October and then again on Sunday 5 November. I say I picked it up during the summer, when in fact I know exactly when. Helen and I were walking the 36 mile Wey Path South Trail which runs from Guildford to Amberley. A slight miscalculation on the Sunday morning meant that we ran the last 4 miles, in a bid to catch the 12.05 train from Amberley. Now, I haven't run anywhere significant for several years and clearly my body decided it was going to ensure I didn't do it again, any time soon. They do say that injuries are often picked up when you do something different – well, there you go, lesson learned! Presented with the same situation again, I'll take my medicine and catch a later train, even if it means paying for another ticket, which, ironically, wouldn't have been the case here. So, at 11.30pm on Monday 6 November, the night before my departure, I made a snap decision, bit the bullet and cancelled six nights of accommodation and my trains, losing around 75% of my money in the process. This was immediately followed by a commitment to complete walking rest along with some targeted physio until Christmas. I'm keeping my fingers crossed.



The weekend between these two social walks, it happened to be Helen's birthday, so I asked her what she fancied doing? 'Do you know what', she said. 'I'd really like to go for a walk'. 'Well, that's a novel idea!' I replied. 'Bearing in mind it's only five days away, I suppose I'd better get my thinking cap on pretty sharpish, hadn't I.' Fortunately, I keep a list (I do love my lists) of circular OS mapped trails up and down the UK, which I try to keep to one side for me and Helen to do. We've done a few now, including the Bedfordshire Heritage Trail, the Roach Valley Way, Stort Valley Way and Imber Range Perimeter Path, amongst others. This is mainly to minimise the cost of transport, as these enable us to drive to a point, do the walk and return home, as opposed to twin train tickets that are likely to be needed for a linear trail. So, my first port of call was to consult said list and after some deliberation, opted for the 53-mile Outer Aylesbury Ring, easily doable in two and a half days.

On Friday 27 October we were up and away from Kent at 5.00am, arriving in Wendover at 6.30, and after a quick cup of flasked tea, with torches in hand, set off in the dark. By the time the daylight was starting to break through, we were up on the main Ridgeway path, giving us some cracking views of the valley below, with the low-lying mist and the distant hum of commuter traffic heading into work. After about 4 miles, the route dropped down and through Princes Risborough, before heading on, over low undulating tracks and farmland, taking us through a couple of really pretty villages, Haddenham and Waddesdon. That night we were staying in the village of Quainton, in an Airbnb, the owners of which also ran the local village shop, which closed at 5.00pm. So, when we stopped at Waddesdon at 3.15pm, just a couple of miles out for a quick bite to eat and to message our hosts and ask them to put a bottle of Prosecco in the shop fridge ready for collection (a very important piece of communication, I think you'll find), we considered we had plenty of time. Or so we thought. What we didn't account for was the closure of a vast swathe of footpaths, caused by the HS2 construction. Not only that, but the logical alternative road route leading into Quainton was also shut, forcing us to make a two-mile detour. We made it to the shop with minutes to spare, after a tiring 25-mile day but, I'm sure you'll be very relieved to know, with a chilled bottle securely in hand.

We were up and out walking by 7.30 the following day, with 21 miles to complete. The path took a very similar pattern to the Friday, with an initial climb out of Quainton, before eventually dropping back down to go through some more really lovely villages, including North Marston, Oving, Cublington and Wing. This long section was marked by many newly tilled fields, with what appeared to be no previous footfall. Apart from the slightly zig-zagging navigation this can create, the boots were regularly coated in a couple of kilos of mud, making it hard work at times. Eventually the route tied up with the firm and very welcome towpath of the Grand Union Canal for the final 4 miles. A mile or so along this path, we both spotted what I can only describe as an enormous pink castle in a field on our left... and so it was exactly that. After some investigation, Helen explained that it was the set for the children's film *Wicked*. We stayed at a very pleasant Airbnb in Aylesbury on Saturday night and after a lovely dinner, expertly created by my 'personal chef', I watched the rugby world cup final, while Helen slipped peacefully into a deep coma!



We only had about 7 miles to do on Sunday morning, but heavy rain was forecast around 10.30, so we didn't hang around. The Wendover Link of the Grand Union Canal covered the first 3 miles, during which we could see the great work being done by the volunteers of the Wendover Canal Trust, who have set about a long-term plan to restore this very neglected section for recreational purposes. I always have an urge to donate towards projects like this, given we benefit directly from the restored towpaths, so that's what I did on Monday morning. We didn't quite make it to the car before the rain arrived and, as a result, got a thorough 30-minute drenching to round off our walk. A very enjoyable walk it was too. We arrived back in Kent in good time for me to return the chef's duties and raise a glass to Helen's birthday.

POSTCARD FROM SCOTLAND 2023

From Graham Smith

Greetings from beautiful Scotland, Kent friends.

Well, it is now three years since Sarah and I left Kent for Tain in the Highlands – just where does the time go? Let me start by saying that I still miss my Kent LDWA friends, and I'm so looking forward to seeing some of you when Sarah and I come down over Christmas/New Year. I will be joining you on the post-Christmas Sevenoaks Stroll and the New Year's Day walk (a Kent tradition I started which I'm so glad Nicola Foad is continuing).

This year I have been pretty busy with my various walking activities, so let's start with the LDWA. I am now chairman of North of Scotland LDWA, having been elected at our group AGM in September. When I moved up here, Julie Cribb asked me to take over from her as group chair, but I couldn't possibly do that, as I didn't know anyone and didn't know the area. But I did agree to be secretary, which was a different matter. Andrew Thacker, who lives just outside Aberdeen, became chair but he stepped down due to business commitments so ... I've been a group chair before, and someone had to take on the job.

We have a wonderful group in NoS and we cover a vast area – the entire Highlands area north of Fort William. To go on group walks, you have to be prepared to travel long distances, which is why we are actively encouraging car sharing, and a WhatsApp group set up by Alison Collins – who took over from me as secretary – has proved invaluable. Of course, the landscape up here is absolutely stunning, and our walks cover the full range of what the Highlands can offer – mountains (Munros occasionally), low level walks along the wonderful coastline, moorland, parts of Scotland's Great Trails (like the Speyside Way or the Great Glen Way), and much else.

Our group walks range from 12 to 22 miles and numbers on them are usually between five and about 18. We often do pop-up walks – put on our group website at short notice, with an email sent out and promoted on Facebook. Our walks usually take place late in the month, mainly on Sundays but sometimes on Saturdays, and last year I put on a midweek walk – the 15-mile linear Speyside Way Tomintoul Spur – which had a good turnout.

At the moment we organise one challenge event, and that's the 52.7-mile Laich O'Moray 50, which took place in October. I organised the marshals' walk on that one so I entered the event. The LoM is, usually, a very good walk, with the stretch between Findhorn and Lossiemouth some of the best coastal walking anywhere, but this year the heavens opened, and we had rain – heavy or light but mainly the former – for the entire time.

It was the second wettest LDWA event I have ever done, behind the notorious Valleys 100 in 2014 (at the end of which all my toes were bleeding – sorry, too much information). Quite amazingly, considering the conditions, of the 62 starters on the LoM, only 13 retired. I seriously considered retiring at every checkpoint but my legs and feet were OK (in fact, I reckon the rain really helped my feet because it freshened them up) and my waterproof coat was doing its job, and I managed to plod and splash round in 17 hours 18 minutes.

So I have my qualifier for next year's Speyside 100, and although I said, after I finished the Hadrian Hundred in 2019, that I would retire from Hundreds, having done 12, I have decided to enter the marshals' walk.

Shortly after moving up here, Julie Cribb asked me to join the organising group for the Speyside 100 and I have got to know a lovely guy in our group called John Henderson, who is on our committee and who has worked so hard to plan the route of our Hundred, so I feel I owe it to him to at least give it a try. I aim to go as far as I can, walking from checkpoint to checkpoint, and if I get round then that will be fine, but if not, then so what? However far I get, I will certainly NOT be entering any more Hundreds (although I have not forgotten the promise I made to Peter Jull some years ago that I would definitely **help** on the next Kent Hundred in 2026).

I have two roles on the Speyside 100: checkpoint liaison on the event and organising the marshals' walk (I haven't yet quite got my head around entering the marshals' walk and organising it as well, but I have time to sort that one out ...). As you may have heard, we have recently had some difficulties with the event, as in October the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds), CNPA (Cairngorms National Park Authority) and FLS (Forestry and Land Scotland) told us they could not support the route going through some areas and posing a threat to endangered species, like capercaillie. So we have hurriedly had to re-plan parts of the route and organise a new HQ, which will now be at Boat of Garten, where we had originally planned to have the breakfast stop. John Henderson has been doing the re-planning, and he has been an absolute star. It's going to be a lovely route with, believe it or not, fewer than 10,000 feet of ascent, considerably less than on many Hundreds. I am confident that any Kent LDWA members coming up to have a



Graham, second from right, with former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and members of organisations involved with the Inverness Festival of Walking & Wheeling, at the Paths For All awards presentations at the Scottish Parliament

go at the SS100 will thoroughly enjoy it – so I look forward to seeing some of you up here in May.

Now over the years, the LDWA has taken me to many places, but in September our association took me to the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, where I had the honour of meeting Nicola Sturgeon, who stood down as Scotland’s First Minister in February. In May, NoS LDWA put on a ‘taster’ walk as part of the Inverness Festival of Walking & Wheeling. The festival involved a week of walks and was organised by the regional branch of Paths For All, Scotland’s national walking charity, and as NoS LDWA was involved with the event, we were a partner. The festival won the Paths For All award for Active Travel Project of the Year and the organisers – and some of their partners, including NoS LDWA – were invited to the Scottish Parliament for the presentations. I had no idea Nicola Sturgeon would be making them until I saw her when we were ushered into the hall where they took place. She said it was the first time she had been asked to do something like that since stepping down as First Minister,

adding that she had some more time to spend walking now, having been up Arthur’s Seat – the 823ft ancient volcano which towers over Edinburgh – that afternoon. So maybe she will join the LDWA ... (Incidentally, that ‘taster’ walk during the Inverness festival produced at least three keen new members of our group, so all in all, it was very worthwhile to get involved with the event).

Of the LDWA’s 42 groups, there are only three in Scotland – ourselves, Heart of Scotland and South of Scotland – so our association is very much a work in progress up here. One of my aims as group chairman is to develop links with the other groups in Scotland, much as you do in Kent with neighbouring Surrey, Sussex, London and Essex & Herts groups. For the last two years, we have had a joint walking weekend with Heart of Scotland group which has proved most enjoyable and very beneficial. We hosted the weekend last year, in Ballater, and next year HoS will be hosting, in Aberfeldy, and we will be inviting South of Scotland to come along.

Well, I already seem to have written more than I had planned, so I had better start winding up and I will try to tell you about some of the other walking activities with which I’m involved.

I’m a Trail Warden for the John o’Groats Trail, a 147-mile long distance path going from Inverness to you-know-where, and my ‘patch’ is the 36 mile stretch from Alness to Golspie, which includes my home town of Tain. I’m required to walk out my ‘patch’ at least twice a year and report any problems, like heavy vegetation, making the paths difficult to walk. Often I’m able to go out with my loppers and slasher to attend to any issues myself (just like I used to in Kent, with the White Cliffs Ramblers’ working group), but if overgrown vegetation is heavy, I contact the JoGT’s full-time Trail Manager, Ken McElroy, who will organise a work party with some more substantial equipment.



Graham completing the John o’Groats Trail



Graham on his 250th Munro, 3638ft Sgurr nan Conbhairn – pronounced skoor nan konavaran

I go out with and sometimes lead walks for Inverness Ramblers and a Thursday walking group, and I sometimes walk with the Great Glen Walking Club. Also, I’m a health walk leader in Tain and the health walks coordinator for our area. Health walks are only 2-3 miles, but they are very rewarding, as they are aimed at encouraging people – who may have certain mental or physical issues – to go out and enjoy our lovely countryside and engage with other people. These take place on Wednesdays and we have a nice little group of 5-12 people coming out.

And I am working my way through the Munros – Scottish mountains of at least 3,000 feet. My tally is now 259 and I have a dodgy left knee (arthritis) so I am hoping to complete them while I can. We'll see.

So that's my Postcard from Scotland 2023. I remain in regular touch with several Kent LDWA members and it was marvellous to walk part of the West Highland Way with Nicola Foad and Cathy Waters in June. We had a really nice few days walking and remembering old times, although the weather could have been better (but it is Scotland ...).

And I must say it's so good – and as a former group chairman, it makes me quite proud – to see the group going from strength to strength, and still organising three challenge events a year.

Wishing you all a very happy Christmas and I look forward to seeing some of you in a few weeks.

With best wishes for 2024 – and (of course) happy walking.

BOOK REVIEW

From Helen Strong

Some months ago, I was contacted by a Rambler who asked if I would like to review some of his publications on walking. Brian J. Rance was born in Woolwich, but now lives in Birmingham. Over the course of the last twenty years or so, Brian has spent time walking long distance routes around Kent and East Sussex. His four titles – *Finding my Place* (2012), *Walking my Patch* (2013), *A Journey Through South-East England: Broadstairs to Lewes* (2018) and *A Journey Through South-East England: Lewes to Woolwich* (2020) complete this vanity-published series.

In his first book, Brian begins by explaining that his books are much more than a walking guide. He used OS Landranger 1:50,000 maps on his walks and each is accompanied by a few small hand drawn maps showing the overall routes he undertook – no scale or mention of distance for each section – so you would not want to use these for thorough planning or navigation. Rather, he takes inspiration from Bill Bryson and Alfred Wainwright, and suggests these books are a way of drawing on memories from childhood and conveying his thoughts on the environments through which he is passing. To all intents and purposes, these books are essentially autobiographical accounts of his journeys.

Now, this style of book is not really my cup of tea, but if you are someone who enjoys reading travelogues, then you would enjoy Brian's style as his accounts are incredibly detailed – and he has spent a good amount of time recounting the trips and clearly has a wonderful memory for stories that he heard along the way talking to the locals in many of the numerous pubs he visited and stayed in. Perhaps it would have been useful to have had an index of these pubs, as I think it would be interesting to see just how many remain open since his visit.

For those of you looking for something different to read on a dark winter's night, Brian's books are available on Amazon. At the time of writing, used editions of Brian's *Finding my Place* are available at a discount price (excellent value and great for the environment) at £2.94 including delivery.

THE WEALDWAY GUIDE

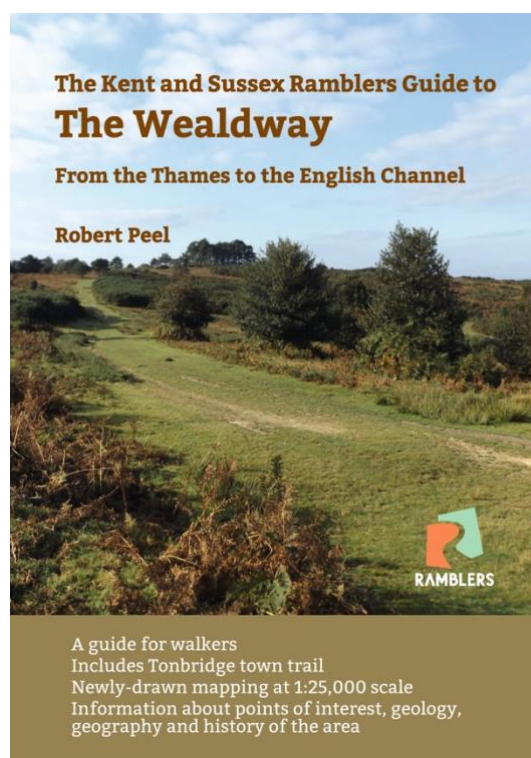
From Robert Peel

Kent LDWA members may be interested to learn that Kent Ramblers have published a new guide to the Wealdway which runs from Gravesend to Eastbourne across Kent and East Sussex. It can be purchased from the Ramblers website here:

www.kentramblers.org.uk/books

Until 31 January, I will be happy to offer anyone mentioning the LDWA a reduced price of £7 per copy including postage.

All profits are used to promote and improve long-distance walks through Kent and other activities that make walking in Kent a better experience.



47th SEVENOAKS CIRCULAR CHALLENGE EVENT

From David Thornton

The 47th Sevenoaks Circular will be on 17 March 2024. Once again, we will be using West Heath School as our HQ and despite escalating costs, this venue still remains our preferred start point, especially when you consider the facilities, grounds and location.

For the third year running, there will be three brand new routes – 15 miles, 22 miles and 30 miles – all of which are now completed and in the process of being checked. There will be three checkpoints in total, all of which are indoors, with all three being used on the 30 mile route, two on the 20 mile route and one on the 15 miler. Like last year, the route will take on a slight figure of 8 design, so Knockholt will serve as two checkpoints, with the third being at Ide Hill.

I anticipate we will need a minimum of 5/6 marshals at Knockholt, which will be open from 10.00am to 1.45pm and the same number at Ide Hill, which will be open from 11.45am to 4.30pm. With HQ registration and catering, plus some car parking and walker retiree pick up service, I imagine we will need 18 marshals to run the event safely. Therefore, any offers of support to help on the day will be greatly appreciated. I will be mindful to avoid ‘over-marshalling’, so that those helping will feel they are being kept busy on the day. In my experience, standing around as a marshal, with insufficient work to do, having given up your day, is rather frustrating. There will be a supported marshals’ walk, for those who have offered to help, on Sunday 3 March.

THE GREAT EXPECTATIONS COUNTRY (SOCIAL WALK) – 19 November 2023

From Cathy Waters

Charles Dickens wrote *Great Expectations* while he was living at Gad’s Hill Place, Higham. He was an indefatigable long distance walker and was known on occasion to walk from the Wellington Street office of his periodicals, *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, home to Gad’s Hill, 30 miles away. Peter Ackroyd tells us in his biography of Dickens that it was quite common for him to walk 20 or 30 miles at a stretch. He notes that in later life it became a way of warding off worries, but in his earlier years it was ‘the blowing off of superfluous energy’. According to his first biographer, John Forster, from Gad’s Hill ‘round Cobham, skirting the park and village, and passing the Leather Bottle’ was a favourite walk with Dickens. ‘By Rochester and the Medway, to the Chatham Lines, was another... Or, taking the other side, he would walk through the marshes to Gravesend, [and] return by Chalk church’. I would love to have walked with him, but I could not have kept pace with his reputed 4 ½ miles per hour!

Dickens was composing *Great Expectations* from late September 1860 and interspersing his writing with regular walks from his home, so it is hardly surprising that much of the novel’s topography is based upon the marsh country and villages of the surrounding area. ‘Ours was the marsh country, within, as the river wound, twenty miles from the sea’, explains Pip, in opening his narrative. It seemed like a good idea for a social walk to design a route linking some of the key sites, although given the short daylight hours at this time of year, we could cover only a portion of what has come to be called ‘The *Great Expectations* Country’.

Starting eastwards from Cliffe, after passing Jools Holland’s castle, we had our first stop at St James’s Church Cooling. In the churchyard are the 13 lozenge-shaped graves of the Comport children, who died of malaria (or the ague, as it’s called in the novel) in the late 18th century. John Forster writes in his *Life of Dickens*: ‘To another drearier churchyard, itself forming part of the marshes beyond the Medway, he often took friends to show them the dozen small tombstones of various sizes adapted to the respective ages of a dozen small children of one family which he made part of his story of *Great Expectations*, though ... he makes the number that appalled little Pip not more than half the reality.’



From there we did a loop south and then west to St Mary’s Church, Higham, which sits remote from the village on the edge of the marshes that run to the Thames. This church is a more likely inspiration for the isolated marshland church described by Pip in the opening to the novel, because in 1860 the sea wall west of Cliffe Creek was not built and the marshes were basically saltings, subject to inundation at high tide, with wet marsh reaching up to the churchyard wall. So Dickens has blended two churches to create the memorable churchyard described by Pip:



'And you know what wittles is?' by F. A. Fraser (1876), in Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard ... that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea.

St Mary's became Dickens's parish church when he moved to Gad's Hill Place in 1859 and his daughter, Katey, was married there in 1860.

After traversing the railway yards at Hoo junction, we ascended to Shorne where most of us sat in the churchyard of St Peter and St Paul's Church for lunch, described by Dickens in *The Pickwick Papers* as 'one of the most peaceful and secluded churchyards in

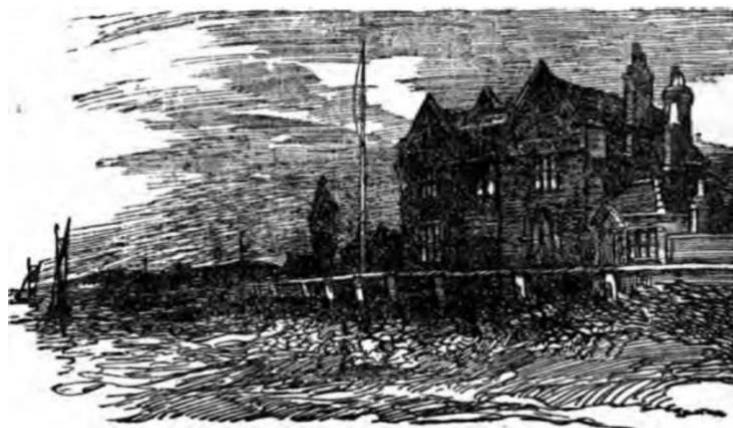
Kent, where wild flowers mingle with the grass, and the soft landscape around forms the fairest spot in the garden of England'. From the high ground to the west of the village we had fine views across to Essex and London, before descending the shallow valley to Chalk, where Craddock's Cottage is marked by a plaque and relief bust informing us that Dickens spent his honeymoon here in 1836. But the evidence for this is slim.

More reliable is the supposition that 'The Forge' (now a house) we stopped to inspect on the corner of Forge Lane and Lower Higham Road was the model for Joe Gargery's forge in *Great Expectations*.

We turned north to join the Saxon Shore Way/English Coast Path at Denton and had one last Dickensian site to note: The Ship and Lobster, known as the first and last pub on the Thames just as you reach the marshes from Gravesend, is thought to be the place that appears in *Great Expectations* as 'The Ship'. Pip, Herbert, Startop and Magwitch stay there overnight before attempting to help the convict escape on a steamer the next day:



At length we descried a light and a roof, and presently afterwards ran alongside a little causeway made of stones that had been picked up hard-by. Leaving the rest in the boat, I stepped ashore, and found the light to be in a window of a public-house. It was a dirty place enough, and I dare say not unknown to smuggling adventurers; but there was a good fire in the kitchen, and there were eggs and bacon to eat, and various liquors to drink.



THE SHIP AND LOBSTER. GRAVESEND
Drawn by O. G. Harper

I'm not sure that my walk encouraged many new converts to Dickens, but I won't be daunted, and may plan a route taking in another part of the *Great Expectations* country next year.

From B.W. Matz, *Dickensian Inns and Taverns*, 1922

