

Christmas Tree Festival - Thursday 1st December 2022

The last of the autumn series of walks set forth from Beckfoot Lane on a dry albeit misty morning. The eight seasoned walkers who had gathered were full of anticipation as they set out on an adventure to the Christmas Tree Festival being held at St James' church in Thornton. Although none of the group felt able to admit it, I guess some did hold the secret hope that they might also be able to meet Santa but he would not be in attendance until the evening and we would unfortunately be too early to see him! We did though unexpectedly meet him on the return journey but more of that later!!!

Chris was first to arrive and was quickly joined by Kevin the walk leader, who had walked the five miles to the start from Idle, leaving at 6.10am. As dawn broke the whole group had assembled, for the 8.00am start. The picturesque Beckfoot Bridge was soon reached, allowing us to cross Harden Beck, without using the ford, which was raging from the recent rain and thus keeping our feet dry. Turning east we quickly crossed Shipley Golf course to reach Ruin Bank Wood, with its' severe climb, but it being early in the day we were able to reach the summit taking long strides and the group managed to stay together. Crossing Lee Lane, we were soon dropping down into Wilsden, only to face our second climb of the day over Wilsden Hill via Nab Lane. A steady descent brought us to Hallas Bridge, where we took Hallas Lane towards Hewenden Reservoir. Picking up the railway trail towards the viaduct, we followed Doll Lane towards East Manywells Farm, before leaving the reservoir and following Milking Hole Beck along the woodland trail through Buck Park Wood, where the ground was covered with autumn leaves still crisp and in places laying undisturbed. On exiting the woods we crossed the A629 by Field Head House and followed meandering paths through at times boggy fields to reach Thornton Moor Reservoir, where we picked up the Bronte Way to Denholme Clough. Keeping on the Bronte Way, through Morton End and Well Heads we were soon dropping down into Thornton village and our much anticipated lunch stop.

Passing the house in Market Street, where the four Bronte children, (Charlotte, Branwell, Emily and Anne), were born, we reached our destination, St James' church, where Patrick Bronte was the priest before taking over the parsonage at Haworth in 1820. The present day church was built in the 1870's opposite the old Bell Chapel, where Patrick preached between May 1815 and April 1820. The font where all the children were baptised was moved to the new church and is still being used. Today's walk though was not a Bronte sisters' walk but a Christmas tree walk and inside the church, there was a magnificent display of 50 Christmas trees, decorated by local and national charities. With it also being 12.15 pm, a well-earned lunch stop was also needed and there was a busy café in the church providing toasted teacakes and soups, along with teas, coffees and cake.

Fortified by the food and drink consumed and relieved of all our loose change in the collection boxes, we were quickly on our way heading back towards Cottingley. The main aim for the afternoon was to arrive back at our starting point before nightfall to alleviate the need to use our head torches and with it being December darkness would start to fall about 4.00pm. Fortunately we had walked two thirds of the way getting to Thornton and it was a shorter more direct route back. Climbing out of Thornton the pace had noticeably quickened and we were now moving swiftly as the group had been fortified by the food consumed. We were soon passing Salt Pie Farm, dropping down to the footbridge over Pitty Beck before

climbing again to Aldersley Farm. Crossing Moorhouse Moor we were greeted by a field of Alpacas at Sandal Farm. We then cut across to Back Lane via Shay House Farm and by chance met Santa, who was in his workshop, preparing Christmas trees for the season ahead!!! We then dropped down to Gazeby Hall, which is still under the process of renovation, This year leaving the road following the path across fields, where Ralph and Robert ignored the walk leaders advice and cut a corner only to end up ankle deep in mud!!! Reaching Shay Gate, we initially followed Shay Lane before cutting through the riding stables to Norr Hill which provides panoramic views across the Aire Valley. As we stopped for a final photograph at the trig point, the sun threatened to break out of the clouds but it was only a brief hope and it stayed firmly undercover all day. We were though now on our final descent back to Cottingley, crossing Lee Lane for a second time and completing the walk in Daylight, arriving back at our cars by 3.15pm.

We had been lucky with the weather, a dry and for December a warm day, GPS's were checked and 17 miles agreed. Another fantastic Thursday walk completed with banter and generally good humour. It was pleasing to see Ian and Steve joining us for a second time this series along with newbie Robert.

This concludes a successful completion of this year's autumn series, I would like to thank everyone who has attended one of my walks. We had a total of 113 walkers throughout the series. The 14 walks totalled 328 miles, we visited 15 cafes and drank numerous teas and coffees. We had two very wet days, when we walked to Ilkley and the Blue Lagoon. Coincidentally these were the only two walks Julia attended. I will not say she brought the poor weather, I guess it was just bad luck for her, but as the saying goes, if it was not for bad luck, she would not be having any luck at all!!! Apart from one walker who fell into the dike at Northcliffe, everyone else emerged unscathed and hopefully more fulfilled from their experiences.

Although the autumn series has concluded for another year and there is no walk next Thursday. I have a couple of winter walks lined up. The next walk is to Haworth in two weeks' time. Having seen the Bronte's birthplace in Thornton today, we will see where they lived - the Parsonage in Haworth, on the next walk. Lunch is planned for Cobbles & Clay.