**JR’s Return – Uckfield Circular, Saturday 7th August 2021**

6 walkers, 21.7 miles – leader Jerome Ripp

After leading 45 Covid walks in the last 13 months with a maximum of 6 walkers, I was looking forward to a bigger group and some “old” familiar faces. I had forgotten about the traditional British summer weather, which is a very effective method of social distancing and my original group of 12 reduced back to the standard 6 with the threat of the storms.

The plan was to repeat a walk I had led in 2008; it should be a simple matter to follow the Wealdway and the Vanguard Way even if we were assaulted by the elements? The river Uck at the start, normally a burbling little stream was a raging torrent and should have been a warning. One mile into the walk we found the railway crossing washed away so this necessitated a substantial detour to the north although the walk across Buxted Deer Park was very pleasant even with horizontal rain. Eventually we got back to the route at Tickerage Mill, last resting place of actress Vivien Leigh who died and was cremated there. Maybe that piece of grit in my boot was … The travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor also lived there for a while. The Wealdway took us through the grounds of the grand manor of Newplace farm and then lunch on the benches at East Hoathly church in the sunshine, a welcome relief after the bouts of rain and an opportunity to drape some clothing to dry out over the ornamental crosses. On to Chiddingly and then the Vanguard Way back to Blackboys accompanied by the “Scarecrow trail” and a sprint finish to catch the hourly return train at 5.33. The afternoon had only a few brief patches of rain and we even had some spells of warm sunshine. However, the recent incessant rain has created some waterlogged and very muddy paths, it felt more like the winter Tanners. The lack of walkers over the last 18 months has also taken a heavy toll on footpaths with many overgrown paths and field crossings where the track has disappeared. Despite the challenges we managed an enjoyable 20-plus miles.

Photographs by Marion Lardner and Mari Espinar