**Avoid the Christmas Shoppers Walk, Thursday 23rd December 2021**

7 walkers, 23 miles – leader Jerome Ripp

First a look at Farnborough Abbey, built as a mausoleum for Napoleon III, the last Emperor of France; his wife and son were also laid to rest here. We walked in through an open gate and as we were contemplating this grandiose structure built to resemble Les Invalides we were accosted by a monk who gently reminded us that this was his front garden. He was happy for us to look around the front and take pictures but not to invade the privacy of his back garden. The first interesting event of the day.

Through Frimley Hatches nature reserve and the first of many vast lakes. Frimley Green lead us to the Basingstoke Canal, an area of quiet, gentle beauty and a good surface to get the miles in. At the vast water area of Lakeside Park we switched to the Blackwater Valley footpath through more nature reserves, which usually means muddy paths, lakes and woodland to the source of the river.

A complete change of scenery as we entered Eversley Forest which is a vast MOD area with fortunately substantial public access. We finally crossed some contours as we passed through places with exotic names; Long Bottom, Skirmishing Hill, to our lunch stop at the military church with a memorial to the “Old Contemptibles”

Nearby on the top of Round Hill is an equally grandiose statue to Wellington, an ironic oddity of history that he and a relative of Napoleon should be so closely connected geographically.  A succession of small hills and sandy tracks took us to the highpoint of Caesar’s camp, a limited view as it was a grey low cloud day. The leader now decided it was time for some fun; an almost vertical descent through the undergrowth, lots of bundu bashing and an off-piste route that terminated in a rather imposing locked military gate. The group rose to the challenge in magnificent fashion in a variety of ways, 1 climbed over, 1 limbo danced under, 2 found a narrow gap where they could squeeze through and 3 found routes in the nearby woodland to get through a barbed wire fence.

A more prosaic final section back on the Basingstoke Canal east to Montgomery, a fine avenue of trees at North Camp and back to Farnborough station. 23 miles with not one stile, no Christmas shoppers and few other walkers. This was the 40th walk I led over the year, 869 miles and an appropriate walk to conclude the year.

Photographs by Jerome Ripp