**Cooling and the Hoo Peninsula Circular, Saturday 27th March 2010**

15 walkers, 22 miles – leader Mike Ratcliff

On the last day of British winter, London LDWA tackled an area of North Kent rarely visited by walkers, even during the kindest of summer months. The flat marshes of North Kent seem to culminate on the Isle of Grain that appears to project itself out into the Thames Estuary, almost reaching out over the water to Essex. The bleak, desolate exposure of the terrain made itself clear soon after heading out north from Higham Station just before 09.00. Fifteen of us rapidly passed through the tiny hamlet of Church Street and the ancient site of a Benedictine Nunnery as we descended onto the flat reclaimed land of Higham Marshes and then on to Cliffe Fort where the old Napoleonic structure still stands solid, grey and weathered, defending the mouth of the estuary, looking across to the Essex shore where the docks of Tilbury were clearly visible on this beautiful clear morning. Flotsam and jetsam of varying ages and origins had scattered all along this stretch of coast like confetti as it always is and walking through the gravel port at Cliffe Creek gave the early stages of this route a real feel of the historic and industrial heritage of this unusual landscape. As we gradually swung round to take an easterly direction we continued to hug the coast by staying on top of the old sea defences wherever possible, allowing ourselves spectacular views over the estuary to the industrial heart of Canvey Island due north and eventually Southend to the east. For many miles and really a good proportion of this walk we didn't see another human soul with only a few sheep and the decaying, skeletal remains of old military structures for company that had braved the elements at the furthest reaches of this barren peninsular for goodness knows how long. With the spring sun now really very warm and bright with just the occasional fleeting cloud to hamper the glow, we passed Blyth Sands in the shallow waters to our left as we continued eastwards to Egypt Bay where we stopped for a well-earned rest after a good few flat and easy miles. Making excellent progress by now we finally turned south to head inland and away from the water’s edge for the last time. Heading for the main ridge of hills on Grain we ascended Northward Hill to reach our most easterly point of the route and joined the Saxon Shore Way, making a sharp turn to the west and into the Woods at High Halstow's famous RSPB Nature reserve. Along this stretch of the route were treated to some truly breathtaking views of Essex, the Thames Estuary and the foreboding marshes made famous by Charles Dickens lying flat, still and open beneath us. Eventually reaching Cooling we stopped at the Horseshoe and Castle pub for our lunch break with the satisfying knowledge that we had almost fifteen miles and two thirds of our walk completed behind us. Unfortunately it was at this same happy time that the weather started to turn against us and the light showers that were forecast for that day started to materialise. With lunch complete and our bodies well rested we continued under the darkening, brooding clouds coming in from the south and west and the surprising chill of the rain on an otherwise very mild day. Ascending back up to higher ground we continued travelling west through a number of quite remote farms and some very old looking orchards through the heart of the Hoo Peninsula towards Great Chattenden Wood. With the sweeping views of open terrain now pulling our eyes south we could see the Medway conurbation sprawling out beneath us and the River Medway itself meandering its way to our left, eastwards round the bottom of the Grain peninsular, eventually to meet the Thames in the wider estuary way in the distance behind us. Now entering the final stages of our walk we could faintly hear the rumble of the A2 in the distance and the village of Higham now coming into view. This area is littered with many small, old chalk quarries, many of them obscured with surrounding trees and it was approaching one such feature when we were greeted with our final great view, possibly the most comprehensive of the day, looking north again, actually allowing us to see most of the terrain of our whole day's walk in front of us. After twenty-two miles we finally approached our destination of Higham Station with the clearing sky fittingly treating us to the days last burst of sunshine.