**Summer on the Downs – Plumpton Green to Eastbourne, Saturday 24th July 2010**

11 walkers, 62 miles – leader Mike Ratcliff

OK, so weekend social walks are generally supposed to be easy going, fun affairs with not too much stress or strain along the way. Absolutely, but why not just occasionally do something a little more ambitious. That was basically what I started to think roughly nine months ago when the thought arose to try and devise a longer summer walk for the group on the South Downs. Something a little more testing. Well, maybe not quite a hundred kilometres testing but certainly more than the usual twenty to twenty-five miles that we all enjoy most weekends. Looking at the old OS explorer maps of the eastern end of the South Downs, I found it terribly hard to decide which areas to include and not too include, knowing what lovely walking many of the paths and tracks in that region provided. Trying to come up with a route that included all my favourite bits was just impossible without the mileage getting ridiculous. Ridiculous? Well how can we ever define ridiculous? I wasn't sure so the more thought I gave it, the more happy I was to just let it be and accept that if I wanted to add a longer walk to the programme in my favourite walking area, I might as well make it really long and a hundred kilometres is such a nice round number. So I decided that this would be my goal and in the end I settled on a route of exactly one hundred kilometres (sixty two miles), starting from Plumpton Green and ending at Eastbourne with a main stop at Rottingdean at twenty five miles. With there not being any spaces left in the programme around the summer solstice when I would ideally have liked to walk with the most daylight, I got the best slot I could which was Saturday July 24th. In hindsight this was a great choice as the weather we had over this weekend was superb, especially on the Saturday when eleven of us set out from Plumpton Station at 09.45. I had planned the route to have a 'dropout' option for people who wanted to come along, but only for the day with our usual distance of twenty miles or so. So a happy eleven was a good start, though how many would really want to join me for the long haul all the way to Eastbourne I didn't really dare anticipate too much until we actually left Rottingdean and were walking into the night. But Saturday morning was fine and bright and we soon covered the couple of miles or so south from the station to reach the base of Blackcap and the prominent South Downs ridge forming a dramatic horizon that dominated our view south and the whole area north of Brighton. After a vigorous climb up onto the South Downs Way, we travelled west to Ditchling Beacon where shortly after we left the main hilltop track to walk south into the heart of the downs near Lower Standean and Stanmer Down. After continuing south for some time we skirted the northern end of the site of Sussex University at Moons Corner to swing north up to Waterpit Hill and Balmer Down where we enjoyed a fabulous but windy picnic lunch on top of the highest point in the area with fantastic views of the sea to the south and the unmistakable graceful sweep of Firle Beacon in the East. The gleaming white cliffs at Seaford Head and the Cuckmere Valley were just visible in the far distance. For those of us that would be walking all the way to Eastbourne we could now see most of our hard work to come in stark technicolour in front of us. After lunch we soon rejoined the South Downs Way to walk south and cross the A27 near Lewes. Shortly after crossing the railway line running parallel with the road, we endured the long but gradual climb back up into the hills near Kingston and continued to Swanborough Hill where the sun was now very strong but visibility superbly clear which made for such an enjoyable afternoon with more views of the sea and the myriad of colours that leap out at you from the hills on summer days like this. Continuing on down to High Hill we were now approaching the northern limits of Rottingdean and a well-earned rest. The White Horse in the centre of town just near the sea front served as a superb venue for those whose day's walking was complete and wanted some refreshment before the journey home as well as the six of us who planned to tackle the remaining thirty seven miles through the hills and along the coast to Eastbourne. After an hour or so in the pub we said our goodbyes and our group of eleven became just six. But half a dozen is a nice number and still makes for a good group on any occasion. So we carried on along the seafront at Telescombe in fast changing but still positive conditions with the light still strong but definitely now feeling like afternoon. We eventually left the front to climb up to Telescomb Tye, Fore Hill and Mill Hill before descending to the valley at Southease which forms the last major gap in the South Downs ridge before swinging down to Eastbourne. The next nodal point on our journey would be at Southease itself where we crossed two major roads, the River Ouse and a railway line all in the space of a few hundred metres. With the light now fading, the radio masts at Beddingham Hill were beckoning us eastwards and up the long winding climb of Itford Hill. Now back on high ground we were also back in what I tend to think of as the Downs proper with Firle Beacon sweeping down to the north and the lights of Newhaven beaming bright to the south. That Saturday night we were especially lucky as a gorgeous, almost full moon soon rose and kept us company with an effervescent presence. After turning due south off the South Downs Way we descended over Blackcap Hill down to Stump Bottom where we turned back up to Gardener's Hill and back north towards Bostal Hill and the Bopeep car park. After this long climb back up through the dark, crisp night to reach the ridge we soon found ourselves at the trig point at Firle Beacon, coincidently at almost exactly midnight. The circuitous route that we were taking allowed us only a very short time back on the top with us soon descending down to the old coach road that runs parallel with the downs for several miles to Alfriston. This ancient byway is under tree cover for much of its length and at that time of night with the moonlight beaming through the leaves from the cool clear sky, the atmosphere was quite unique for us six walkers. I guess it was around this time with well over half the distance completed and the aches and pains of a very long distance walk starting to creep in that we now thought more about the coming morning and the final push over the hills to Eastbourne. I knew that we would soon be back down at the coast at Seaford but even that still felt like quite a long way off with another hard climb rapidly approaching and a weariness now setting in that maybe all overnight walkers will experience at some stage. Finally reaching the outskirts of Alfriston after our mammoth push down that never ending flinty track, we made the gruelling climb back up to the South Downs Way near Black Patch though after probably less than a mile of walking west we turned off the line of summits to take the Green Way, another old bridleway that took us on an undulating route south through woodland and farms towards the coast. With the intense neon lights of Newhaven Harbour seeming almost tangible in the early hours of that Sunday morning we walked towards them with the smell of 'civilisation' drawing us in. We soon found ourselves passing the old church at Bishopstone and then soon down on the seafront at Seaford itself. I now realised for sure that we were making excellent time on this trip as I had always anticipated that we would have seen the dawn by the time we rejoined the coast at Seaford. Continuing darkness however was all we had with only the sound of the sea and the very faint outline of the horizon made visible by the moon. The growing lights of the town also added to the strange atmosphere of this very sleepy place as we walked eastwards towards the towering mass of Seaford Head that dominated the murky skyline. Now needing a serious rest we crashed out on the tourists benches by the beach at the eastern end of the seafront by the famous Martello Tower that sits solid and strong, guarding the town at the base of the cliffs. Dawn! After we had all rested our stiff and aching bodies by the sea with some of us even grabbing a few moments sleep, we pushed our way up the rising chalky outcrop that culminates in the summit of Seaford Head, over to the other side with the beautiful panorama of the Cuckmere Valley opening up before us. The shocking white ripples of the Seven Sisters trailing away to the far horizon under the fresh new light of dawn. The walk following the South Downs Way up to the Golden Galleon at Exceat was rather tedious though it was lovely to turn round after crossing the River Cuckmere and to aim for the first of those great coastal peaks in front of us. The river was very low, the earth very dry and the morning air was still quite cool and fresh though the climb up to the finger post at Cliff End soon got the blood really pumping hard again. And so we traversed the hills one after another with the sea to our right and a bright pink strip of morning light piercing through the petrol grey coloured cloud across our view to the east. Reaching our final rest stop at Birling Gap we made a special effort I think to take stock of the situation and savour the moment with the knowledge that our long hard journey was nearly at its climax. We lay there on the stony grass bank by the car park with the morning air now warming up and the day now fast establishing itself. With the last efforts at foot surgery and other remedial action complete, we rose from our resting, sprawled postures for our final push up to the Belle Tout Lighthouse and on towards Beachy Head. Very, very weary now with the finish now almost in our grasp the great sprawl of Eastbourne soon came into view as we crept round the side of the hill above Whitebread Hole with the sea more grey now and a thick, dark low cloud rolling in from the south. All that now remained was the formality of walking from the base of the hill and the terminal point of the South Downs to Eastbourne Station. It was a joy to have finished but certainly a greater joy to have persevered to walk through the night and gain such a unique experience in such a wonderful place.