

GOING LONG-HAUL

Long-distance walking is yet another way of experiencing hills or wild country and offers the chance of combining hill-walking with the romance of long-distance travel. Apart from the National Trails (Set up under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949) there are hundreds of other trails covering most of Britain. These are typically sponsored by county councils and are mainly off-road. The three routes described here represent the author's only experience of long-distance backpacking (as opposed to B & B). If drink seems to be a constant theme then readers should be assured that this kind of walking is thirsty work indeed.

THE PENNINE WAY 1974

Robin Payne was a physics teacher at Birkenhead School. He had this absolutely brilliant Worcester accent and a head of short dark curly hair. Although not enormously tall, he was built like the proverbial brick outhouse and could be very intense, especially after a few drinks. He was actually a very nice guy. Rob did the Pennine Way in 1974, taking about a fortnight. His article in the Feb '75 mag (no.3) is Rob at his robust best. In "*Some Home Truths about Long Distance Walking*" he sets out the three essentials: burning desire, planning and physical fitness. Then, in a companion article entitled "*A Personal Account of one of the Country's Great Mountain Treks*", he awards stars to the various sections: thus Edale to Calder Valley, which he describes as "*some of the filthiest, dirtiest and most hazardous ground I have ever walked on*" is awarded a star rating of Nil. Calder Valley to Malham, described as "*the most civilised section of the route*", is awarded two stars. Malham to Horton "*Real hills at last*" gets three stars. Amazingly, he describes the wild and dreamy section across Wensleydale and Swaledale to Teesdale as "*very indifferent*" and awards it only one star. I think the weather coloured his opinion somewhat; he complains of Great Shunner being "*completely in mist*". However, he does say "*the Tan Hill Inn can be recommended*" and "*there is a large gritstone cave behind the inn which serves as a useful bivvy shelter, especially when one half-cut*".

Next comes Middleton to Alston, described as "*the best section of the whole walk*" and awarded four stars. Obviously Rob was a man for the big events: High Force, Cauldron Snout, High Cup Nick, and Cross Fell are all in this section. The section from Alston to Bellingham gets two stars and is described as "*very pleasant*". However, the part running alongside Hadrian's wall is said to be "*Ad infinitum*" (Ho, ho!). Finally, Bellingham to the finish at Kirk Yetholm, which he is quite charitable about. The Cheviot section was done at night for some obscure Payne-type reason, resulting in a sudden descent into waist-deep bog.

This section, surely only because it was the end, gets three stars.

And the great man's conclusions: "*it is not an extended 14 peaks; - it can be very boring; it can be very exciting, even too exciting.*"

OFFA' S DYKE PATH 1983

Unusually for long distance routes, the Offa's Dyke path takes as its theme a man-made feature. There are places where the dyke has been destroyed by subsequent agricultural or industrial activity, or where it was never built because of the presence of natural barriers such as dense

forests, and in these cases the route takes advantage of nearby hill country such as the Black Mountains in the south and the Clwydian Range in the north.

In June 1983 Don McIntosh and John Huxley set off from Chepstow for the two week backpack to Prestatyn, having dragged themselves away from a rather nice beer garden. It was hot and destined to get hotter. Boots and breeks were soon discarded in favour of trainers and shorts. They stopped briefly at Sedbury cliffs and then headed north, past where the climbers were finishing their routes, past Wintour's leap and the Devil's Pulpit, high above the Wye Valley, and eventually down to Brockweir. They met a couple of lads from Ramsbottom - what a pair of characters! They were called Eric and Mal and off and on they were to meet them all the rest of the way, along with five others.

Day two saw them heading for Monmouth via the challenging up and down of the Kymin, an interesting hill looking over the town. After a couple of pints they pressed on westwards, hoping to reach The Hostry at Llantilio-Crossenny. At the start of the open country they bumped into another character, a botanist who used liberal quantities of strong language:

"I'm not much of a botanist but the sprinkling of familiar names gave a strong impression that this guy knew what he was talking about. The subject of his wrath was the EEC as it was then known, and in particular its farming policies. 'Tell me where you can find the fucking Lesser Twayblade these days' he moaned. We shook our heads in exaggerated sympathy for the plight of both him and the Lesser Twayblade"

They had their own problems: two or three miles short of the Hostry they ran out of steam and pitched the tent in a field. If they hadn't stopped for a drink in Monmouth they would have made the pub. This meant that they came across the Hostry somewhat early the following day, which didn't particularly matter as they were only going to Pandy, this side of the Black Mountains, The guy at the pub was an amusing southerner who called everyone "my old butty". This mystifying reference to stale sandwiches was the only one experienced on the entire walk.

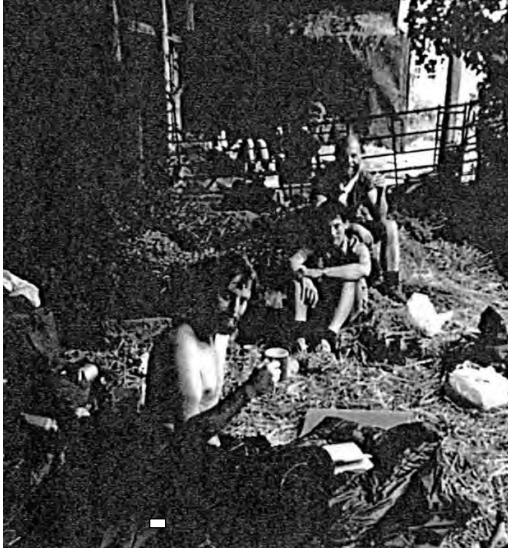
Anyway, he cashed them a cheque. On the way to Pandy, Steve from High Wycombe caught them up: he was the sole survivor of a group of four who had set out from Chepstow two days earlier.

After Pandy there were seventeen miles of the Black Mountains to cover to Hay-on-Wye. Once up on the ridge the going was easy, with the route taking about 12 miles to rise gradually to Hay Bluff. The route continues through Hay-on Wye, Kington and Knighton, where there are well-preserved sections of the great earthwork, and down onto the Severn floodplain:

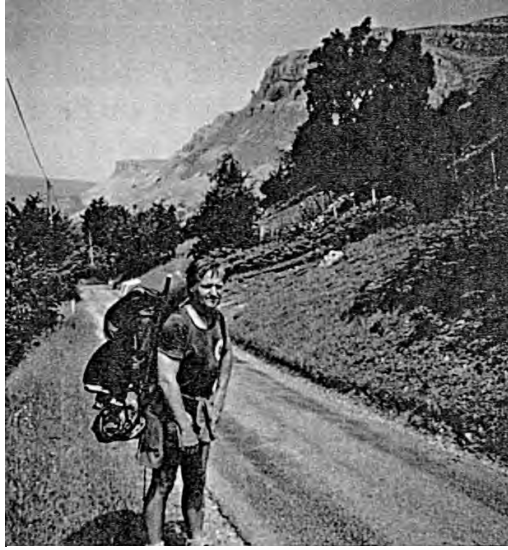
"We set off from the Blue Bell near Montgomery, having slept in a nearby hay-barn. The heat was starting to get to us: out of the resultant haze rose vast electricity pylons. We plodded on along the endless series of levees and eventually camped on a pub lawn, definitely one of our more convenient pitches".

North of there the route runs into Llanymynech before taking to the Berwyn foothills and some more good examples of the ancient earthwork around Trefonen:

"We camped at Trefonen, a nice little village with a couple of pubs. The one we were in, whose name escapes me, was run by a guy who was either an alcoholic or had just won the Pools, because the prices being charged were ridiculous and the food appeared to be free. We staggered out at some indeterminate hour back to the tent. Almost immediately I accused Don



Don MacIntosh at the Blue Bell Barn
Offa's Dyke Path



John Huxley below Craig Eglwyseg
Offa's Dyke Path



Campsite on the Cotswold Way above Cheltenham (Photo: P.Creseson)

of stealing a cheese and tomato roll I had been saving. The argument raged on, much to the amusement of our fellow campers. Finally I stormed out of the tent to sleep under the stars. The following morning we found the roll: I had been sitting on it while I accused Don of taking it "

Such are the pressures of long-distance backpacking. Bed and Breakfast is so much more civilised. The route then continues north before swinging west towards Llangollen and then north again through limestone country:

"As ever, it was as hot as hell and there was even less water than usual. We knocked on a farmhouse door to see if we could get our water bottles filled. A little girl appeared and led us to this fantastic spring, its waters issuing directly from some limestone cavern deep in the hillside. Later on, good old Dave Dobbie did one of his amazing brews in the shade of a tree. Thus we made it to Llandegla".

Offa's Dyke Path finishes beautifully over the Clwydian Range to Prestatyn, another twenty-eight miles, giving a route of endless variety that is rich in history. The interruptions caused by some 640 stiles make it harder than it might at first seem.

The Offa's Dyke Path runs from Chepstow to Prestatyn, a distance of 176 miles.

It was opened on 10th July 1971, as the fourth National Trail (then called Long-Distance Footpaths) after the Pennine Way (1965), The Cleveland Way (1969) and the Pembrokeshire Coastal Path (1970). It has also been done by Ross McGraw in 1982; Sue & Neil (1985) in an impressive six and a half days (Sue is not impressed by the argument that she should do it again and this time pause to admire the excellent scenery); by John Huxley again (solo) in 1995; and by Paul Russell and his son Christopher in 1997.

THE PENNINE WAY 1984

"Ten years after Rob Payne's crossing, Mike McEneaney and myself were on the train to Edale to try and emulate the Master's feat. There had been other attempts, none successful, although Brian Dibben had done it at least once in his pre-GMC days and of course Andy Chapman had also done it. I was originally thinking of doing it over three weeks but Mike could only spare a fortnight so that was the time limit. We were carrying full backpacks of about 35lbs but the intention was to eat out wherever possible."



John Huxley

A few pints at the Nag's Head in Edale kicked off the proceedings. In the morning, they had trouble finding the right way out of the campsite but eventually trudged over Kinder on a dampish day, on to Bleaklow and to Black Hill, where they pitched camp on a dried out cotton-grass moss. A wind sprang up and they spent half the night putting pegs back in. It was not an auspicious start. The



And Mike McEneaney

following day they did 11 miles to the White House and camped in a small disused quarry. Day 3 was to Cowling, where they pitched in a farmer's field. *"Any chance of pitching a small tent in your field?"* they asked. *"Yes. Just let me catch the horses first!"* There was a pub called the Bull which had, unbelievably, a real ale version of Whitbread Trophy. It *started* doing food at 9 o'clock. Next day was to Malham, a lovely, reasonably easy day finishing off along the river. The weather improved steadily as they moved north and in fact stayed good for the rest of the Way. Then:

"To Horton-in-Ribblesdale on day five, by which time we felt we were beginning to get to grips with The Challenge. We had a meal in the Three Peaks Cafe and headed for the Crown, the intention being to camp wild somewhere towards Hawes. Roger Hughes was in the area on business and he had calculated that we might be somewhere around Horton this day (apparently he and Ian Gearing had been plotting our course). At the time the Golden Lion had become an outdoor pursuits centre so the Crown was the only pub in Horton. We sat in the bar, enjoying the XB and talking to a couple from New Zealand, she working as an accountant in London, he having only just arrived in the U.K. Hughes burst in shortly afterwards in his incomparable way and the five of us had a most entertaining session"

They were in danger of staying too long:

"After about five pints we decided it was time to head north; the New Zealand couple were staying in the Crown but I can't recall what Roger was doing; I hope he was staying somewhere. M & I bombed northwards, fuelled by drunken adrenalin. After about five miles we pitched in the middle of nowhere on Birkwith Moor, having covered about nineteen miles that day."

Day six and on to Hawes in Wensleydale for a pint, via an old packhorse route and part of the Roman road to Bainbridge. A Canadian lady took a picture of the "great big mugs" they were drinking out of. *"You should see them in Germany"*, said Mike. They toiled over Great Shunner Fell, an enormous whaleback, to Swaledale. On the way down Mike's knee began to give trouble. Fiery Jack and a rest day were decided upon as they sat in the Farmer's Arms in Muker:

"In the morning we strolled to Keld, a publess village, and then found an idyllic festering spot



by a little waterfall on a tributary of the Swale. We had only four miles to go to the Tan Hill Inn so there was no rush and it was important to rest Mike's knee. We lay in the sunshine eating sardine butties and having a brew; it was brilliant".

They strolled over the moor to Tan Hill, first sighting it from half a mile away at the end of the broad track; it was quite a sight, this highest pub in England and in fact Britain at 1,732 ft above sea level.

There are several "Highest Hotels", but the Tan Hill is definitely the highest pub. They arrived there at about four o'clock in the afternoon:

"No beer, we thought, as this was before the days of all-day opening; not to worry, tea or coffee would be welcome. We entered the bar: it felt terrifically atmospheric, as befits the highest pub

in Britain. A big blond Aussie chap was behind the bar. 'Good Day' he grinned. 'Er, what are you serving' I asked cautiously. 'Anything ya like, mate!' That did it. Our Aussie friend was soon dispensing the Theakstons. That was the night we met Gerry and his dad, travelling with Richard, and Phil & Jan from Stoke-on-Trent. It was quite a night with the people who were to become the Pennine Way reunion group".

The next day, fairly badly hungover, they pressed on to Middleton-in-Teesdale, stopping for coffee at a farmhouse en route, where the good lady regaled them with tales of snowploughs on the A66. Beyond Middleton, the route is spectacular as it runs up the Tees to High Cup Nick, past High Force and Cauldron Snout, before descending to Dufton on the Vale of Eden:



Mike at High Cup Nick

"In Dalton we were marooned, both on the campsite and in the pub, by hordes of orienteers, including our old friend Pete Halling, the ultimate Guardian reader of all time and three times winner of the GMC 14 Peaks. We viewed the orienteers with tolerant amusement: we, after all, were involved in a serious project".

On day ten, they shook the orienteers off on the long haul over Cross Fell, the highest point of the Pennines at 2,930ft. From there it was down to Garrigill where the George & Dragon and a nice riverside camping spec awaited them.

"I was determined to have wine with dinner that night. We pitched the tents and repaired to the pub. The meal was excellent and I duly had the much-vaunted two glasses of wine; M stuck to the pints. I then switched on to bitter (or was it lager?) as we got into conversation with a couple from the northeast. After a couple of pints I began to feel drunk, almost as though I'd been drinking a lot of whisky in a short time (known to medical science as the Torridon effect). Making my apologies, I left M talking to the Geordies and staggered back to the tent. Desperately, I tried to find the coffee but failed and collapsed into a stupor leaving various tins of food etc littering the grass. M got a shock when he returned: he thought we'd been burgled! From memory, I was sitting a short distance away having a fag on the river bank. I still felt drunk the following morning, even to the extent of singing "Oh what a beautiful morning" in a loud and confident voice. All I had drunk was two glasses of red wine and two pints of bitter or lager, not exactly a heavy night by our standards. It remains a mystery to this day."



Hadrian's Wall

Day eleven, and four pleasant miles along the River South Tyne to the gem of Alston, the highest market town in England. Then seventeen miles to Greenhead at the west end of Hadrian's Wall. An enterprising publican had put

signs on one part of the route saying things like "Real ale pub, good food, three miles" and then, a bit further on "Only a mile to go. You can make it!" Very welcome it was too. They camped unofficially at Greenhead, somewhere by the start of the Wall:

"We found a pub lurking a bit to the south. While we were there a coachload of Geordie ladies arrived for a good night out and got quite excited over our bare brown legs. 'Whoa, bonny lads!,' etc. We later found out that we were the only members of the loose group that we had become to find a pub that night".

Day twelve, along Hadrian's Wall, spectacular and atmospheric but hard going (as Rob Payne said, *ad infinitum*) then north through the Wark Forest to Bellingham, a super little town with four pubs and a campsite. Day thirteen, to Byrness, was a reasonably easy day of moorlands and forest tracks. The campsite was run by a couple with a "genuine" Ellesmere Port accent who in the winter lived in a caravan in the shadow of oiltanks. The final meeting of the crew took place in the pub: names and addresses were exchanged and arrangements made for a reunion in June 1985, at the Tan Hill Inn, where they had all originally met up:

"M & I laid in a little whisky for the following night, which was to be spent in the wilds about three hours short of the finish at Kirk Yethohn. Phil & Jan were also camping somewhere en route. Gerry, Bill, and Richard were going straight through to Kirk Yetholm twenty-seven miles away, hoping to arrive there before closing time, and were then to be driven home by a friend of Bill's. What a way to finish. we didn't fancy that at all".

Day fourteen and, virtually, final. They followed the watershed over "The great green bastions" of the Cheviot Hills, hitting the Border about four miles north of Byrness, then past Chew Green Roman Camps at the very head of Coquetdale, on to Lamb Hill, Beefstand Hill and Mozie Law, with Scotland on the left and Northumberland to the right. Then on over Windy



Gyle and Score Head to Cheviot and Auchope Cairn. They descended into a wild area of large tussocks just west of Hen Hole and pitched. As the sun went down they sipped the Grouse and reflected on their journey. They had nine miles of the Pennine Way to do. Day fifteen and definitely final: they strolled into town, reaching the Border Hotel at Kirk Yethohn at 11.45. A retired bank manager took a picture of them

shaking hands outside the pub under the sign which says "End of the Pennine Way".



John Huxley at God's Bridge over the River Greta at Stainmore Gap
Just short of the halfway mark on the Pennine Way 1984



Mike McEneaney at the final camp at Hen Hole on the Cheviot
Pennine Way 1984

The Pennine Way, the first Long-Distance footpath to be created, runs for 250 miles from Edale in Derbyshire to Kirk Yetholm on the Scottish border. A number of other members have also completed this classic of the long-distance genre, including Andy Chapman and Brian Dibben.

THE COTSWOLD WAY 1988

"In early 1988 I rashly suggested to Pete Chreseson ('Cress') that he might fancy joining me on the Cotswold Way in the late summer of that year. He agreed as he felt that 'by then he would be knackered and needing a pleasant backpack in an area of the country new to him'. So it was that Cress joined me on my third and final long-distance backpack before the conversion to B & B."

To pay for food and booze they had a kitty; they also carried some food for breakfast and butties, including Flora margarine. Cress liked to quip that they were doing the Cotswold Way with Kitty and Flora. Cress had also brought along a tin of curry for their first meal. The amazing thing about the Cotswold Way was that they did not pay a penny for camping. This was not intentional: it was just the way things worked out.

Having taken the train to Evesham they walked to Chipping Camden and on to their first night in a mist shrouded picnic spot next to the A44 just beyond Fish Hill, only a couple of minutes from the pub. The tin of curry was not required. The following morning, Sunday, they walked to the picturesque village of Broadway, beyond which was another pub. Cress was determined to have only a single pint but it was felt that "two pints and no harm done" was the order of the day. Cress purchased the second round just before closing time. Time passed pleasantly and it suddenly dawned on them that this was the first Sunday of extended afternoon opening (to three o'clock). Huxley immediately ordered a third round and eventually Cress, being persuaded of the benefits of lunchtime drinking, ordered a fourth.

Duly anaesthetised, they staggered off to a hill overlooking Cheltenham, pitched the tent, and had dinner with a suitably large bottle of wine. The following morning, there they were, all mixed up with the early morning joggers and dog-walkers, all of whom were surprised to find a couple of back packers enjoying breakfast. Cress was in his usual bombastic form:

"Cress never tired of pointing out how big his sack was compared with mine although this to me seemed entirely fair as Cress was younger and fitter than me and, anyway, someone had to carry the wine; he was therefore highly amused the following day when a rather posh lady out riding blamed the nervousness of her horse on the 'knapsack' I was carrying."

One day later in the week they had three pints of strong cider at lunchtime and then wandered round a mini-supermarket, purchasing twenty fish fingers (Cress thought the previous night's ten fish fingers a little miserly), two tins of potatoes and two tins of peas, plus a litre and a half bottle of red wine, most of which, as usual, was carried by Cress. That night they cooked the sumptuous feast at either end of the Cress tent which, along with his sac and his choice of menu was, of course, fabulous:

"Eventually, the mountainous meal was ready: it has to be recorded that while I only managed seven fish fingers, Cress polished off thirteen. He only had half the wine though".

On the last but one day, Friday, Cress persuaded Huxley, against his better judgement, to have a fifth lunchtime pint. This in fact happened by accident rather than by design: they first had a

single pint in a pub just outside Chipping Sodbury before proceeding into town to buy food for the evening meal from the post office. Sadly, the post office had been absorbed into a pub restaurant a couple of years earlier, so they settled down to a couple of pints which, unsurprisingly, turned into four. Huxley spent the afternoon feeling even more top heavy than usual, eventually becoming lost in a wheat field with no sign of the route or of Cress, who had the guidebook:

“Just as I was thinking I would have to abandon the route altogether, I came across a marker and found Cress, at whom I swore somewhat. Our continuing search for food yielded only a pasty from a service station. At about a quarter to six we came across a closed pub. Such a situation posed a challenge: we duly persuaded them to open and do their duty by bona fide travellers. After a refreshing couple of pints we walked on a mile or two and pitched for our final night, eating Cress's famous tin of curry for dinner”.

Irritatingly, Huxley developed severe blister problems going into Bath and had to hobble along while Cress lectured him on the Georgian glories of the city. Anyway, they got there and stationed themselves in the British Rail bar:

“The bar contained the obligatory drunken couple, the female half of which, an Irish lady, tried to engage us in slurred conversation. We ignored her after some initial pleasantries and buried ourselves in our respective newspapers. The Irish lady lost patience: 'What are ye anyway, a couple of queers?' she asked disparagingly. Cress lowered his Independent. 'Madam' he roared, 'if you were a man I'd smash your face in!’”

This measured response had the desired effect and they were left to enjoy their beer and reflect on a most successful and enjoyable week's walking.

The Cotswold Way runs for 100 miles from Chipping Camden to Bath, mostly in the Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It has recently been approved for upgrading to National Trail status at a cost of £750,000 over the next five years.

Other long routes traversed by members include the Southern Upland Way (Peter Chreseson, 1987); the Ridgeway (Don Macintosh, Mike Davies, 1988); The Dales Way (Don Macintosh, Mike Davies, 1989); the West Highland Way (Mike & Anne Borland, 1989); the Anglesey Coastal Path (Neil Harris, 1993); the Ribble Way (Sue & Neil, Nicola, Huxley, 1995); Glyndwr's Way, (Huxley, 1996) ; The Pendle Way, (Hilary, Christine, Les, Mike & Marilyn, Sue & Neil, Nicola, Huxley, 1996); the Cleveland Way including the Missing Link (Huxley, 1997); and the Coast to Coast (The McEneany's and Huxley, 1998, the latter not quite making it).

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