

IAN WRIGHT – WALKING THE SOUTH DOWNS WAY – AUGUST 2016



I originally started the walk at the end of June but after experiencing relentless driving rain for most of the two days I was walking, I baled out half way at Amberley and caught the train home. Having explored the route I was keen to have another go and the weather forecast indicated that there should be at least three and possibly four dry days ahead, so I mounted another attempt.

I managed to complete it and it was demanding to put it mildly. However, this might have been because I completed the 96 miles in three days as opposed to the four that I had originally planned, losing half a stone in the process. Anyway, the story of what happened.....

It was a dark and stormy night, well actually a bright and sunny day when I set out from Winchester on Tuesday morning. I was carrying food for four days and a tent, sleeping bag, cooking stuff etc. I had marked the water points on my maps, I had divided the route into twenty legs, varying slightly in length depending on how easy it was to photocopy the OS map.

As I mentioned I knew the route as I had walked it at the end of June when I had been deluged and given up at Amberley after two days. Last time I had spent much of the first day walking with a lady from the merchant navy who I had met on route and we had spent an hour at a pub in Exton at lunchtime. I found that when I was walking alone I was actually making faster progress than last time. I stopped again at the Shoe at Exton but only for about twenty minutes.

I did have a problem with the Boomtown Festival just east of Winchester. I had not bothered to check and found that the 9km perimeter fence was slap bang on the route. The place was amazing with model village and fields of abandoned cheap tents. Anyone with any time could have harvested a mountain of equipment. There were teams of people doing a clear up operation. I managed to walk onto the site but a couple of miles later found a twelve foot solid fence blocking the way. After a few minutes I found a bloke who pointed out a gate which I went to. The steward there

said I could not walk around the edge as it would be on the 'tank range'. When I was suitably dismissive she said that I might have a problem with the dogs.... Telling people complete b*****ks might make sense during the festival but not afterwards. I duly walked out the gate and followed the fence round until I could re-join the route but it had cost me about forty minutes.

I carried on, reached Winchester Hill at 1.30pm and stopped again at Whitewood lake a few miles later. It was a hot day and I was becoming aware that I ought to try and take on more fluids. I had two mugs of tea and a mug of milk at Whitewood. I got lost again in the woods by the A3, the place that needs the most signage has the least, but reached the place that I had camped last time by 6.00pm.

The first section is not particularly brilliant for views but it all opens out at South Harting when the route climbs up onto the Downs. I reached this point and was considering looking for a place to pitch, when I was joined by a psychotherapist. She identified herself as Antonia and told me she was backpacking and had done two days but would welcome some company, as there had been animals near her tent the night before which I think might have spooked her little. She did however wish to walk a bit further so we actually did a couple more miles. I found a lovely spot to camp by a trig point. It was a beautiful sunset, great views all around, no people about and no vehicle tracks. Antonia preferred to move on so we walked about another half mile and pitched near Treyford in a wood around 8.30pm, our tents a few metres apart. I had covered about thirty miles.

We ate and hit the hay only to be woken up around midnight by what was probably a deer, barking and stomping around. Having got back to sleep again it was the owls turn. A fine variety of screeches and hoots which was actually wonderful, even if it did disturb my sleep. On Wednesday morning I waved goodbye to Antonia and set off at 8.30am and saw deer in the next set of woods. Once again I made good progress and was thinking I might camp near Brighton. I was especially looking forward to the teashop at Amberley but once I got there I found it was closed on Wednesdays! Fortunately the general stores stepped into the breach. was by this time looking a bit grim and was smelling a bit strong to put it mildly. I was also needing more fluid so drank a pint of milk, a litre of water and a cup of tea which the store owner made for me.

As I neared Brighton I found it would have been tricky to find anywhere quiet enough to pitch so decided to go for the YHA at Truleigh Hill as they have a campsite. I got there just as it was getting dark but had covered another thirty miles. I had a wash but no shower as I was worried about my feet. It rained overnight but stopped soon after I woke up. I set off at 7.45am on Thursday and it was perfect walking weather, dry and hazy but cool. It took me three hours to get to Ditchling Beacon where I was looking forward to having an ice cream or two but the van wasn't there. I carried on and it arrived after I had walked another 500metres. I did not go back but had a brew which I had got down to a fine art. A cup of tea became really important and reviving as I was getting tired.

I kept ploughing on with lovely views and I knew this section well as we have walked all of it at some point. I thought about camping at YHA Southease near Newhaven. When I got there the staff looked at me a bit askance but were great and I had a pint of milk, a large pot of tea and some flapjacks. By the time I had finished it was

4.00pm. There were about fifteen miles to go but over four hours daylight left so I decided to go for it and headed off for Alfriston along the lovely Firle Beacon ridge. By the time I reached Alfriston I was in need of an energy hit so wandered into a bar and ordered a half of coke and half of water. I downed them in about thirty seconds and headed on for Jevington. From there it was only about four miles to the finish, the problem was it was getting dark and I would not make it in daylight. I bumped into some of the BHR who were surprised to see me, and probably the state I was in.

The last section is going south on the west side of Eastbourne before dropping down into the town. By the time I got to look for ways down the final hill it was dark and I did struggle a bit but eventually found away into a residential street and found a bloke who pointed me to the sea front. I had hoped to have fish and chips and a pint but having arrived my body relaxed and all the aches and pains started to make their presence felt. I found a bus back to Brighton by accident and it was by now about 10.00pm so I just got on it and took another one from Brighton town centre home, arriving about midnight.

So, an epic trip, to cover the distance in three days was very satisfying. My legs were fine but my feet were a bit sore to put it mildly. I had not walked that sort of distance since the Nijmegen Marches in 1986. That was in Holland so it was flat and I was not carrying anything on that occasion. Anyway, mission accomplished. Just out of curiosity I weighed myself on my return and was a bit shocked to find that I had lost half a stone. Some of this might be fluid loss however as I was in a dehydrated and exhausted state, not surprisingly.

Ian Wright

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