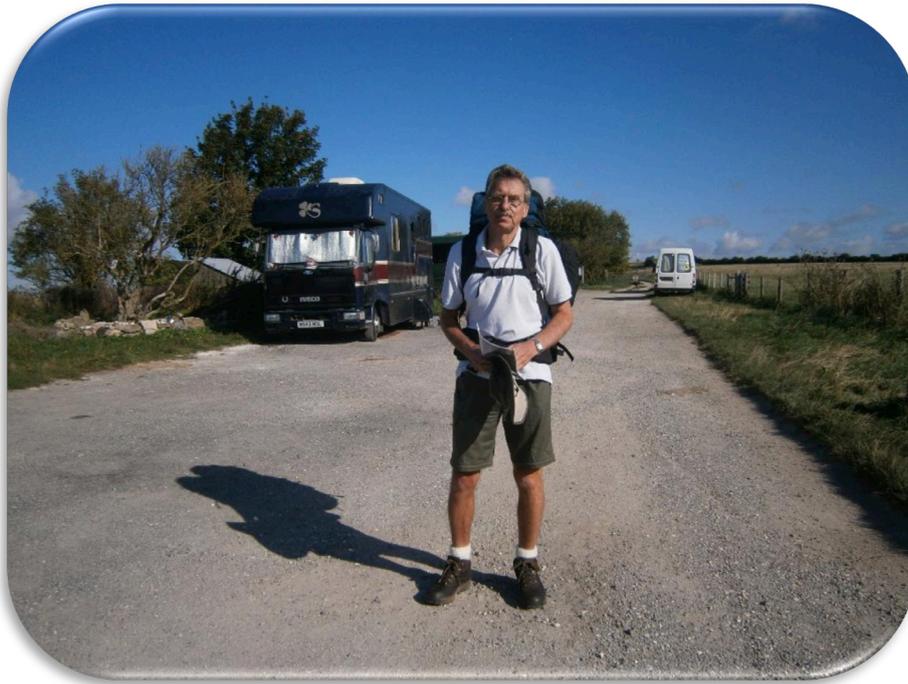


IAN WRIGHT – WALKING THE RIDGEWAY WALK – SEPTEMBER 2019



I was given a lift to the start by some friends who then walked with me for the first few miles, which was very welcome. Conditions were perfect, bright and sunny without being too hot, and the forecast suggested that they would remain so. I had four days food, a tent, sleeping bag, stove etc. so was well equipped to make the best of the conditions and complete the walk in good time.

Once I had said goodbye to my friends I headed off on my own towards Barbury Castle and past a car park full of ramblers. The Ridgeway skirts Ogbourne St George to the south and then opens out with views to the west. I stopped for lunch at a junction of tracks and had the only rain I encountered on the whole walk. A short sharp shower interrupted my cup of tea and it was sufficient to make me rapidly find my cagoule and rain cover for my pack. Fortunately, it stopped shortly afterwards and I resumed my journey in the dry.

After crossing the M4 I had a tea stop at the water tap by the farm at SU264835. The flow was slow to say the least but at least it was operating. The views to the west on the next section were magnificent with the sun shining on the villages of Hinton Parva and Bishopstone. I made good progress and around 7.30pm was approaching what I mistakenly thought to be a campsite at Hill Barn, SU337852. The water point on the route just before it allowed me to top up my supply but I arrived at the 'campsite' to find that it was in fact a B&B, already booked, and if I wasn't Norman, that's the name as opposed to the ethnic group, I wouldn't be able to stay there.

I headed on to find a suitable place to pitch my tent but at this point the path seems to be very short of woodland and, being early September, there were lots of people around working on the harvest with combine harvesters, tractors etc. Others seemed to be out walking dogs. I was anxious not to cause any problems so wished to pitch where I would not be noticed but this was looking to be increasingly difficult. As the light was fading I crossed a small road just south of Letcombe Bassett and found a thin stretch of wood beside a wide track. There was still the occasional agricultural vehicle driving along it but it was by now totally dark in the wood itself so I was able to bed down without anyone noticing.

Eventually the people disappeared for the night and I was able to get some sleep. It was quiet initially but I can vouch for the fact that the English countryside has a wide variety of owls, coming to a tree near you, or, in this case, near me. They seemed to turn up on rotation just as I was nodding off but the endless hoots, screeches etc were wonderful and I didn't mind my sleep being interrupted.

The next morning I was just packing up to move when a rather surprised dogwalker spotted me as he walked past but we simply exchanged greetings and I set off around 8.00am. The weather was lovely and sunny but as the morning progressed I did start to run seriously short of water. The problem with a chalk ridge is that there are no streams from which to get water so I was reliant on any water points along the route. I carry two litres but with the overnight stop and the demands that walking in the heat put on I was down to the last dregs by lunchtime. Fortunately I arrived at Streatley in the early afternoon, by which time I was absolutely gasping, so went to the Swan and had a large coke, for both the energy hit and the fluid. I had a coffee in adjacent Goring before heading north towards Wallingford.

The path here runs beside the Thames for a few kms before turning east and becoming more wooded again. The church at Nuffield is most welcoming and has a sign offering both a water point and potentially, at the right time, tea and cake. I was slightly too late to take advantage of this and also keen to cover a few more kms so didn't dally and soon started to come across woods that would be ideal to camp in, finally opting for one called 'Jacobs Tent' which seemed very appropriate. There being nobody around made it more relaxing than the previous evening and I listened to the radio whilst I cooked, before settling into my sleeping bag. My sleep was initially disrupted by a fox who approached the tent and barked a few times before taking my hint and moving on. The mandatory owls put in an appearance at various times but I did have an good night's sleep.

I woke early and was away by 7.15am heading for the M40 where the route coincided with the Icknield Way for a while. The weather was once again warm and sunny but the water point just after M40 was fully operational so I had plentiful supplies. The path goes near Princes Risborough before climbing up to a viewpoint where I had lunch whilst admiring the scenes towards Aylesbury. I popped into the Plough for another swift coke before looping round to the south of Chequers and the footpath then crosses the

drive. There were suitable warning signs about and I did encounter one strange woman in the woods who had no dog with her, wasn't wearing a pack of any description and had blue hair and a combat jacket. Clearly dressing to blend in.

From there it was on to Wendover and the one time that the signposting wasn't clear was in Wendover itself, another sign on the high street would have been really useful but following a brief stop for a pint of milk I was soon on the path again.

My original plan was to camp near the end of the route on the third day and complete on the walk on the morning of the fourth but the weather forecast was for rain overnight and the next day wasn't looking much better. I was now within striking distance of the end but a concern was that daylight was just starting to fade. I stopped for a final cup of tea at Bull's Wood before crossing the bridge over the A41 and the Grand Union canal leading to Tring station.

From there it was the final leg through the woods to the car park and on to the final gentle ascent to Ivinghoe Beacon itself and the end of the Ridgeway. It was now dusk so the magnificent views that should have been visible were somewhere out in the murk. The descent to the west is steep so, after a few minutes, I made use of the last vestiges of daylight to drop down to the A489 and made my way to Town Farm Camping for the night.

Having completed the 86 miles in three days I did feel a bit whacked but my feet were in fairly good shape and it had been an excellent walk. An hour or so later as I nodded off to sleep the rain came hammering down. There really is nothing quite like being in a tent, knowing the hard work has been done, listening to rain on the outside.

The next day dawned overcast but dry, so after a clean up I headed back to collect my car via a taxi to Luton airport, National Express coaches to Swindon and a bus to Wotton Bassett. Not sure where to head for next but the Two Moors Way may be the next choice.

Equipment

- Tent: Vango Force10 Helium 100
- Pack: Lowe Alpine Alpamayo
- Sleeping Bag: Sleepwalker Two
- Boots: Brashers

Ian Wright – September 2019

