

Walk Across England

Day 5

Patterdale to Shap

September 14, 2019

We had two distinctly different options for the fifth day of our walk across England and, like the famous Robert Frost poem, but in a more literal sense, we chose the path less traveled. With heavy winds gusting up to thirty-five miles/hour, the more popular but precarious straight up climb to the tallest peak in the Lake District was nowhere near as safe sounding, to this card carrying acrophobic, as the much longer but also more gentler and flatter walk that hugged the base of the mountain along the banks of Ullswater. And, as it turned out, despite the extra five miles of walking, we chose wisely, as this was not only a calmer walk but also one of the most beautiful of our journey thus far.

We began our twenty mile day under sunny but cool forty four degree conditions, chilled even more by the stiff winds that greeted us as we headed north after crossing the old stone bridge in the village of Patterdale, at the south end of the massive Ullswater. At nine miles long, the Ullswater is the second largest lake in the Lake District and we spent a good portion of the morning walking on the narrow soft surfaced path that undulated along the fern-lined banks of this magnificent body of water. Every step of the first six miles of our walk, we were treated to the most spectacular scenery. The shores along the other side of the lake were edged by lush green farm pastures, dotted with brown cows and all bordered by stone walls that worked their way perpendicular up to the base of a magnificent mountain range across from us, that, thanks to the early morning sun, had taken on a gorgeous pinkish hue. And all along the base of those towering mountains were a mix of classic tiny whitewashed farm cottages and large stately manor homes. And, in the middle of this picture perfect view, were countless sailboats of different sizes and colors gracefully floating along. What a sight!

After several miles of slow going, thanks to my frequent photo stops to permanently preserve the memory of this stunning panoramic display, our path turned eastward away from this endlessly beautiful lake. I felt a bit sad to see the lake slowly drifting from our view-shed but within a half mile, just after passing through the quaint village of Pooley Bridge, we picked up a grassy path lined by stone walls and were again surrounded by yet more beautiful scenery.

And not only had the scenery changed but so had the solitude, as we were now passing lots of folks walking briskly in the opposite direction, each and every one of them cheerfully greeting us. And as the narrow path opened up to a wide lush green moor, it looked as if we had walked straight into some sort of public event, for as far as we could see there were walkers everywhere, traversing a labyrinth of well worn paths, that seemed to be converging from all different directions. Families, kids, couples and individuals of all ages, including many that looked well into their eighties, were all walking, although some were actually riding horses, along these public paths. We could now see why our guide book called this section of the path a “public bridleway”, for everywhere we looked for miles across the wide open, sun-drenched moor, we saw folks on foot or horseback.

We had seen relatively few people along the path during the first four days of our journey and, the ones we had, were all Coast to Coast “through” hikers. But what we were witnessing today was a tradition embedded even deeper in the soul of this ancient island than long distance hiking: weekend British villagers on foot. And because today’s twenty mile route was taking us through and around several villages, and on a Saturday to boot, our once solitary hike now felt like a promenade walk with hundreds of day walkers. And, even more impressive to behold: not a single one of them had an iphone in their hands, as all seemed totally immersed in enjoying the beautiful surroundings of their sunny walk.

After a few miles we left the plush grass carpeting of the bridleway, with the throngs of walkers, and picked up a narrow paved lane that, over the next five miles, weaved it’s way from one tiny village to another, past old churches, over old stone bridges and walled gardens. And finally, it brought our now tired legs, back onto a grass path that led us across a long expanse of rolling farm fields, past grazing sheep and cows, for the last stretch to Shap, our final destination of the long day.

As we crested the top of one last hill, just on the outskirts of the historic village, we were suddenly greeted by a stunning view of the ruins of Shap Abbey, tucked in the center of a moated grassy hollow, down below us in the distance. Founded in 1199, the Abbey thrived until Henry VIII’s men plundered it in 1540. Despite the 16th century destruction, the ancient remains, including an impressive intact bell tower, were still a magnificent sight to behold. So, even though our tired legs had already covered twenty miles and we thirsted for a drink of water, since we had run out a few miles back, there was absolutely no question that we were going to take some extra time to tour these beautiful ruins.

After taking in that magical slice of British history at the abbey, we covered the last half mile into Shap, to our bed and breakfast accommodation, The Kings Arms, which also housed the village pub. As we entered the low ceiling beamed pub we were overwhelmed with the loud sounds of a room packed full of rowdy soccer (“football”) fans, all cheering and yelling at a large television screen. We had stumbled into the center of a real British treat: locals watching a Saturday soccer match in the village pub!

And after a pint of thirst quenching beer and a delicious pub meal, while watching the end of the soccer game, we headed upstairs to a much deserved rest and as I drifted off to the sounds of the celebrating pub dwellers, still yelling and laughing below us, my mind kept replaying our beautiful walk along that endless lake, across that wide open grass bridleway and under the shadow of the abbey’s ancient bell tower ruin. With the Lake District now behind us, tomorrow’s trek would bring us to the outskirts of our next National Park stop: The Yorkshire Dales. I couldn’t wait...

WALKING TIP OF THE WEEK: No matter the surface, like the diversity of our multi-surfaced walk from Patterdale to Shap, the key is to try your best to keep your stride length short, so you never see your feet hit the ground in front of you. Staying off your hard boned heels, enables your arch to use its natural elasticity to absorb the shock of the impact. Do this and you'll not only prolong the life of your knees and hips but you'll also be more stable on your feet and will naturally walk faster! The best way to train your body to shorten your stride length is to strengthen your core (gut, backside and torso) through a daily series of basic exercises. Stop by Ragged Mountain sometime and I'd be happy to give you some free tips and a demonstration.

HIDDEN LOCAL WALK OF THE WEEK: A wonderful close-by place to simulate the peaceful and relaxing feeling Cynthia and I had while walking along the banks of the mighty Ullswater, is the road leading to the Sugar Hollow dam in Whitehall. This quiet, scenic four mile flat stretch of road meanders along the beautiful Moormans river as it cascades from the Sugar Hollow reservoir and flows eastward. Free public parking is available, courtesy of our kind Whitehall Ruritan neighbors, at the Community Center located at the intersection of Garth Road and Browns Gap Turnpike. The walk from the Community Center to the start of the river is about a mile and then it's another 3 miles west to the iconic old dam. You may also choose to park in the public lot well above the dam. For a detailed map of this wonderful walking resource, text me at 434-962-1694.

Mark and Cynthia Lorenzoni completed the 200 mile Coast to Coast Walk Across England last September and invite you to simulate their 15 mile/day journey by walking, right here in beautiful Central Virginia, 15 miles each week.