

The Walk Across England

Day 6

Shap to Kirkby Stephen

We started the sixth day of our coast to coast journey under cool, overcast skies, which felt just right, as we knew that we had a long stretch of British countryside to walk before we'd hit the western end of the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Despite the daunting task of having to cover another twenty miles, we were comforted by the prospect of it being the flattest terrain of our journey thus far.

After a short walk from our bed and breakfast to the outskirts of the village of Shap, we crossed a farmer's field, where we were immediately met with the overwhelming sight of the six lanes of the M6, one of England's main superhighways.

When the legendary British naturalist and hiker Alfred Wainwright first mapped out The Walk Across England in 1972, he had the following mantra as his guide: to create a scenic route across one of England's narrowest points that would take the walker from one coast to the other, while traversing three stunning National Parks and countless quaint villages but never touching a single urban area. And that's exactly what he accomplished with his now legendary walk, which annually hosts over 10,000 outdoor enthusiasts from all over the world. And, even though this rural and peaceful two hundred mile west to east walk steers clear of city life, there's no avoiding the fact that, along the way, you still need to cross the three major highways that run the north/south length of England.

But, thanks to an high arched walkway over the M6, we safely and easily crossed one of the busiest roads in Europe.

And as we made it to a set of farm paths on the other side, we noticed a man and a woman and their dog quickly coming up behind us over the walkway. We paused to take a look at our map, just as they came up alongside us. And as they did, the man asked, with a pleasant british accent, "Coast to Coasters? If so, then you need to take the path to your left."

And, with that one simple bit of advice, our friendship with Sue and Graham, a retired couple from Somerset, and their amazing Border Collie "Neo", began.

Over the next 20 miles we talked about our families, our careers, our children, our passions and our country's leaders, as we crossed the long Westmoreland plateau, which took us along rolling fields covered with massive limestone bedrock, over ancient stone bridges that shadowed rushing streams along the fells, through countless farmyards teeming with sheep and cows and finally across a seemingly endless stretch of heathered moors before leading us into Kirkby Stephen, our final stop of the day. Seems that we had so much more in common than our love for walking in the countryside and, thanks to our non-stop chatter flavored with Graham's wonderful wit and sense of humor and Sue's calming presence, plus the flatter terrain, it felt like we had only walked a few miles as we clocked our twentieth along the cobblestone path leading into this ancient market village.

But there was an even bigger highlight to the day, than our entertaining twenty mile walk with our new found British friends and that was the surprise Facetime call we received from our oldest daughter Audrey, about half-way into the hike.

We had made it a rule, which turned out to be an easy one to follow, thanks to the unending gorgeous scenery, to never use the phone while hiking, except to take photos. We saved pub time each evening for our calls “back home”, so when Audrey called while we were in the middle of our walk, I thought “Ut-Oh...something must be wrong!”. We stopped to answer the phone and we were greeted by not only the face of Audrey but also that of her boyfriend, Stewart and as soon as she held up her left hand we both knew what the call was about. Cynthia immediately started to cry and I let out a loud but joyful “Congratulations!”. Sue and Graham both smiled and gave us a thumbs-up as they kept walking up the path.

This aging baby-boomer still can't get used to today's amazing, almost futuristic, technology, for here we were, out in the middle of remote Northern England, thousands of miles from Charlottesville, seeing and talking to our freshly engaged daughter, as if she and her fiance were actually walking alongside us. As we ended the call we noticed that, despite Sue and Graham having walked way out ahead of us, almost out of sight, their dog Neo was still sitting about 10 meters up the path, staring at us intently, as he patiently waited for us to start moving again. What's this about? Sue and Graham explained with a chuckle, after we caught back up with them, that, “he's instinctively a herder and you had strayed from the flock!”.

We bid farewell to Sue and Graham, hoping to run into them again, as we reached our bed and breakfast, The Jolly Farmers Guest House, a converted 19th century pub that's upstairs window seats hung over the street below and within eyesight of the village square and its centerpiece: a magnificent 13th century church, dubbed the ‘Cathedral of the Dales’.

And speaking of the Yorkshire Dales, tomorrow's walk to the C2C halfway mark, would take us into the western end of this world famous National Park but not before carefully crossing, by tip toes, the notorious waist deep, boot sucking peat moss bogs along the transit of the Pennines. It all sounded both daunting yet thrilling. We can hardly wait to get going again!

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WALKING TIP of the WEEK: With all the rain we received last week and now with the chilly mornings that will be with us for the rest of this week, I'm reminded of that phrase “There's no such thing as bad weather for exercising outdoors...only ‘bad clothing!’” The key is to dress appropriately for whatever weather challenges face you on any given day. So, on Thursday I wore my lightweight Goretex jacket but with shorts in Zeta's warm downpour and on Saturday morning, when temps cooled into the mid thirties, I shifted into my comfy warm tights and wicking quarter zip top with my fleece hat. The key is to layer up, so as to not only insulate and wick sweat away from your skin but also give yourself the flexibility to shed clothing, as you start to heat up.

HIDDEN WALKING VENUE of the WEEK: One of Cynthia and my favorite places to walk is along Decca Lane, a hilly two mile gravel road that winds through thick woods, past streams and over a beautiful river in Ivy. A round trip ticket on this quiet walk, covers four rolling miles.

Park at Meriwether Lewis School and walk along Owensville Road for a few hundred feet, before turning right onto Decca.

COME JOIN US at THE CENTER for our C2C TALK: Cynthia and I will be doing a zoom presentation of our “Walk Across England” at The Center this coming Thursday (11/5) afternoon. Not only will we be showing slides, as we give an overview of the walk, but we will also be providing pertinent travel tips, including which sherpa company is best and what to pack. Come join us for this free presentation by making a reservation on The Center’s website.

Mark, who starts each day with an early morning walk or run, invites you to simulate his and Cynthia’s Walk across England, where over 13 days they averaged 15 miles/day, by you walking your 15 miles every week along the beautiful paths and roads of Central Virginia.