

Walk Across England

Egton Bridge to Robin Hood's Bay

Final Day

As we left the beautiful Georgian manor home, which had provided us with yet another wonderful B&B rest, for the start of our last 18 miles to the North Sea, Cynthia and I both felt a strange combination of push and pull emotions. We were torn between the excitement of this being the day that we would finally make it to the other side of England and the sadness of this also being our last day of what had been the walk of a lifetime.

After a pleasant one mile walk along a flat, crushed gravel farm lane from Egton Bridge to the neighboring village of Grossmont, we approached what was to be our steepest road climb of the entire walk. Our guide book called the 33% climb, out of Grossmont to the Sleights Moor, "calf popping", and that graphic description was spot-on, as this steep two mile stretch of pavement literally seemed to be pushing us backwards the entire way up. Despite the chilly early morning temps, I was already breathing heavy and sweating profusely only a quarter way up this legendary monster climb.

As we finally crested the top of the seemingly endless hill, Cynthia and I were rewarded for our hard work with one of the single most memorable views of the walk. There, way out over the moors, twelve miles off in the distance, was the glimmering ruins of Whitby Abbey towering on the edge of the cliffs of the deep blue North Sea that lay outstretched for as far as our eyes could see beyond the ancient church. We were suddenly overcome, yet again, with a mix of emotions as we soaked in this magnificent view. Cynthia and I were instantly thrilled at our first sighting of the opposite coast but then, just as quickly, saddened at the notion that those last miles, that lay between where we stood and the beckoning coast, were to be our last ones of our magical trip. For the past twelve days we had been pushing towards the end goal of reaching the other side of England but, now that it was finally within sight and less than seven hours away, we weirdly enough wanted time to slow to a crawl.

After crossing several more miles of heathered moors we entered Little Beck Wood, a massive woodland park. Unlike the famous and much longer Appalachian Trail, which is categorized as a "canopy" hike, the C2C is a "horizon" walk with wide open 360 degree vistas throughout, so our two mile trek through LittleBeck was our longest wooded path of the entire journey. And there were so many fern lined paths intersecting with one another throughout the beautiful woods, that we actually got lost a few times.

Once we found our way out of the labyrinth of paths in Little Beck, we quickly made our way through the last few moors to Hawsker, the last village before the cliffs. We knew we were getting close, thanks to the sandier path under our feet and the squawking cries of the seagulls overhead.

And then suddenly, just as we came around a tall hedgerow, there it was...the North Sea, outstretched for miles and miles out beyond the edge of the cliffs, within a few feet in front of us. It was a simply stunning view!

And, now that we had reached the farthest eastern end of the C2C route, Cynthia and I took an abrupt turn south along a narrow dirt path that snaked along the very edge of the cliffs, with only a knee high old stone wall separating us from the sheer drop to the waves several hundred feet below. Within minutes, we could see the clay tiled rooftops of Robin Hood's Bay, our final village destination, off in the distance, clinging against the cliffs all the way to a beach cove down below in the distance. Our hearts were racing as we left the soft path and walked through the outskirts of this famous old smugglers village. And, to bookend the steep climb that kicked off our day, our walk was ending with an equally steep descent but this time down a narrow street, bordered on both sides by beautiful 17th century shops and homes, that led us straight out onto the wide beach.

The late afternoon tide was out, so we had to walk quite a ways to get to the edge of the breaking waves. Once it was deep enough, we dipped our boots into the cold water and then, in keeping with tradition, we dug into our backpacks to retrieve our pebbles that we had been carrying since the rocky beach along the Irish Sea at St. Bees. On the count of three, Cynthia threw hers far into the surf and then it was my turn. I hesitated for what seemed like an eternity, because I knew that once I released my pebble, it was all over. I looked over at Cynthia, smiled and then let out a sigh as I heaved my precious pebble, that had been with me through all 200 miles, out beyond the breakers.

And just like that, with two simple acts, our 200 mile journey, that had taken us from one coast of this beautiful island to the other, had come to an end. As I looked out into the North sea, through the elation of completing this truly amazing walk, a melancholy feeling slowly crept over me. Despite finishing the longest walk of my life, oddly enough, I suddenly felt sad knowing that it was over.

This journey went way, way beyond our already high expectations, as it had led Cynthia and I across three magnificent National Parks and face to face, intimately, on a daily basis, with the most picturesque scenery I've ever seen in my long life. The friends, like Sue and Graham, that we met along the way, will forever be in our hearts and every single beautiful village, ancient church, thirst quenching pub pint, delicious meal and cozy bed and breakfast thrilled us, as they transported us, on a daily basis, to a world and time far away.

And, as corny as it may sound, above all else, I will forever cherish the time spent walking, in solitude, alongside Cynthia. This was the best gift of our forty years together, as I loved sharing every single step of the way with my best friend...even the steep and high ones that challenged my acrophobia!

And through all of the peaceful time together, immersed in the unique beauty and history of Northern England, we both came away with a deeper appreciation of our marriage and for our life back in Charlottesville. We ended each day, not only reflecting on the gorgeous miles we had just covered, but also taking stock of our relationship and the precious people in our lives back across the Atlantic. Despite all of the golden discoveries of the walk, we realized that what really mattered in life, were the daily treasures of our family, our friends and all of the many wonderful folks in the community we call "home".

Our longtime dream had finally come true and as I stood gazing at the endless ocean, I struggled to face the reality that the walk, which for so long lay out ahead of us as a dream, was now behind us, permanently etched in my memory bank. But I also found myself looking forward to coming home to those treasures.

In a way, that's how I'm feeling right now, for I'm a bit sad as I draw this Sunday series to a close but, at the same time, I'm so appreciative of you, my Central Virginia neighbors, who joined me each week. And so I'd like to personally thank all of you who reached out to me throughout the last thirteen weeks, as you joined Cynthia and I for a recounting of our Walk Across England. I've thoroughly enjoyed retracing our walk and it's been a thrill to get to "meet" so many of you along the way, as over one thousand of you texted, called, wrote letters or stopped by, in person, to tell me how much you enjoyed reading the series each week. Along with having the opportunity to intimately relive the walk, through writing about it, your positive feedback made my heart soar each and every Sunday.

And thanks to your keen interest in the C2C and hearing about your own personal walking stories, you've inspired and motivated me to create a website devoted specifically to everything walking in and around our neck of the woods. It will be full of maps, trails, tips, photos and more. And, to partner with the passion I've witnessed from your overwhelming feedback, I'll also be forming a Central Virginia Walking Club, to bring folks together on foot, once the pandemic has passed. Stay tuned, in the new year, for details on these two new free walking resources.

I'd also like to publicly thank the Daily Progress and John Shifflett, the paper's Sports Editor, for generously dedicating so much space each Sunday over the past thirteen weeks. Their support of community sports and recognizing that walking is a viable sporting activity is much appreciated.

In closing, Cynthia and I invite you to call on us if you wish to learn more about the C2C. It would truly be our pleasure to answer any of your questions. In the meantime, we hope you will find as much joy and relaxation from walking in our beautiful community, as we did from our Walk Across England. Keep walking, everyone and we hope to see you out on our local paths and roads in the future!

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THE WALK ACROSS ENGLAND C2C PATH...WHAT TO BRING and WHAT TO KNOW:

- Nuun electrolyte tablets...great for replenishing the nutrients you sweat away
- 20-24 ounce hand held water carrier
- Telegraphing walking poles/sticks to channel your inner billy goat!
- Garmin watch with GPS tracking...a must!
- A good old fashioned compass
- Super stable and dry Oboz boots...incredible comfort!
- Supportive arch inserts...a must for the uneven terrain
- Handy lightweight portable phone charger
- Waterproof pants, jacket and hat
- Lightweight but sturdy waterproof daypack
- Awesome Feetures merino wool socks...wonderful wickers to keep your feet dry!
- Super comfy Saxx and Patagonia underwear!

-Sherpa Expeditions...they did a wonderful job of reliably transporting our bags and booking the best B&B's imaginable. A truly first class outfit!

-Ordnance survey maps with 1:25 000 scale

-Wainwright's Coast to Coast book with photos by Derry Brabbs (currently out-of-print but it can still be found)

-Coast to Coast Path by Stedman and McCrohan

-The Center (formerly The Senior Center) has a YouTube of a recent talk Cynthia and I gave recounting our walk, accompanied with photographs. Go to The Center's website to watch the presentation.

***Please text me at 962-1694 if you'd like to find out more about the items on this list and where to find many of them.