

HADRIAN'S WALL



The most beautiful waymark of any British trail, Hadrian's Wall snakes away at Walltown Crag.



OFF THE WALL

Fun, friendship, blisters, a bus and begging for sandals...
a beginner's account of walking Hadrian's Wall Path.



Why do I always leave things to the last minute? The day before and I'm still shopping for decent walking boots. The first pair does nothing for my country cred. Another pair threatens the skin on my shins. The third pair looks the part, fits like a glove and at £39.95 they're a snip. When the assistant throws in thick socks, I lift off. A bargain like this must be a good omen.

It's a personal challenge: to walk Hadrian's Wall Path east to west, from near Newcastle to well beyond Carlisle, a modest enough goal in six days, but the furthest I'll have walked. I've fixed up accommodation for all but the last two nights and I admit it; I'm like a kid who's broken up for the holidays, raring to let off steam.

I've started. At 8.35am I stride past the Swan Hunter shipyard. There's something archaeological about the welded girders which function as seats on the path. But I notice, a bare 40 minutes after my walk started, a blister.

"Blasted blister," I bleat pathetically. I explore the options; something to cushion the inflating balloon that is my right heel; a sponge if I have one. I don't. And then, the most preposterous lateral thinking; sponge... cake. Yes, what about that Northumberland fruit cake I brought with

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me? Messy perhaps, but the sultanas and glaciated cherries might do the trick.

Of course, there is always the plaster, a few patches of which my dear wife had the prescience to pack. But how do you plaster a balloon? I divert the nagging heel with different walking styles. I try a tiptoe progression, but that must look as though I'm going to creep up on someone and say "Boo". A whole sole tread produces a strange, gliding motion. But it makes me feel I've joined a mystic sect, which wears long cloaks and floats above the ground. I settle for a limp.

Normally when you meet your landlady, there are hallos, name droppings, room showings, followed by "what time breakfast?" Once creature comforts are catered for, a not-too-innocent question crops up. "The path beyond. By the road is it?"

"Yes," Mrs W informs.

Pause. I'm thinking Tarmac. "You see, it's my feet."

"I know you're walking and perhaps I shouldn't... but there's a Hopper Bus."

It's 11 o'clock and I've arrived. Housesteads is huge and I'm humbled. As a walker, I should have been glimpsing it from afar, enthralled by its escarpment setting. If I had approached from the Path, I would have been grasping the significance of its scale and layout, bit by bit. But spewed out from the bus, I'm not ready to take it in. It's all too sudden, like a present opened before a birthday.

Besides, I have this identity crisis. Who am I? A drop-in tourist or dropout walker?

It's good to be walking again and, with a light breeze, cooler. Walking in woodland, five feet or so above ground level, is, well, elevating if semi-detached. Above me are Scots pine and sycamore, below foxgloves and bracken. On both sides, the landscape stretches for miles, Scotland to the north, Pennines to the south.

Fresh from Housesteads, though, I'm caught in the past. I imagine this wall 15 feet high, in full view of the surrounding terrain. How would I have felt then? In command, yes, but a remote sort of control; secure enough atop all the masonry. Up here, I'd be unassailable by day, but by night, what then? Was that a rustle of wind or men snaking through the grass?

I see two 30-something women striking out towards a steep hump

(crag in the vernacular) that this switchback section has thrown up. The Wall follows it like the spine of some angry dragon, but they seem determined to follow the most spiteful route. Goaded to action, I speed up to intercept them.

"Excuse me. Taking the high road, are you?"

"Yup," the taller one answers brusquely, without stopping. "We're in for the challenge."

This is a bit of a put-down, but I don't rise to the bait. Instead, I continue skirting the outcrop, away from the line of the wall, all the time in heated discussion... with myself. Hell-bent on one thing, aren't they: getting there. They can't have blisters, can they? Why not? Good to have an aim, though. But, stumping on like that, despite everything, what are they missing? Did they stop to take in that daunting rampart of a cliff face, topped by the Wall and with a sheer drop to Crag Lough, the lake at its foot? Were they impressed by the commanding view of the landscape, dotted with clumps of trees?

One hiker I met likened the trees to a group of Borderers mustering forces before an attack. He'd let his imagination off the leash. Had they given themselves the chance to get the feel of the place and notice things? Walking alone as I am, I'm learning. Not slavishly following anyone or anything, I'm able to take things in as I go along, watching, waiting sometimes, playing with opportunities. I'm open to new experiences.

We have to live with ups and downs. With their undulating spine, these hills have a fair few of them. So do my blistered feet and it's becoming noticeably harder to negotiate the distance between a raised foot and the ground.

Me: "There's a nice patch of grass in front of you. How about it?"

Feet: "What's new?"

Me: "Moving forward, that's new."

Feet: "It looks like a bed of nails."

Me: "You're joking. Just try it."

Feet: "What's it worth?"

And that's where the cost-benefit analysis breaks down. I can't buy them off. The feet are winning. When my feet were agreeable, three miles per hour was not unreasonable. With our differences of opinion, let's settle on one-and-a-half miles per hour, or half-a-mile (that's



Far left: Looking east along the spectacular section of wall from Housesteads Fort.

Left: Walk with history (rather than blisters!) beneath your feet.

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Hadrian's Wall divides north from south, Romans from Scots.

880yds, I reckon) every 20 minutes. Rounding down that works out at around 40 paces a minute, or one pace every one-and-a-half seconds. Looking down, and even allowing for my arithmetic, that sounds fast.

It's taken seven hours to walk from Twice Brewed, with stops. That's about one mile per hour, a crawl. The boots are making things worse. My feet are overheating. It's like the prickly heat when you walk on white sand in high summer. My boots don't breathe, that's the trouble, and my feet are suffocating. I've got to get some lighter footwear. But where? What would I give to slip on those sandals skulking at the bottom of the wardrobe back home? Like most people have – probably half-forgotten. Which gives me an idea...

I can feel the resolve growing as I shuffle towards the pub. It's bold and a bit of a cheek, perhaps, but this is the game plan. I'll knock on doors in the village and ask each occupier whether he or she might possibly be about to throw out an old pair of sandals. The one thing people don't do is chuck out the old when they buy new.

A row of Victorian terraced houses fronts the road. Which door shall I knock? And there, staring me in the face about halfway along is a gift. An old upright vacuum cleaner has been left outside a front door, a candidate for a car boot sale if ever there was. The front door is ajar:

"Is anyone there?" "There is," a voice comes, followed by a lady in her mid-years. Over her shoulder, straight in front of me is a flight of stairs and at the bottom of the stairs, tucked in close at the foot of the bottom step, are not one, but two pairs of sandals – men's.

"I've been walking the Path and these boots are chronic. I can't go on like it and I wondered if you'd possibly have an old pair of sandals you might be getting rid of."

"There's my husband's sandals. Here," she points. "But he's not in."

"D'you think he would miss them, just one pair, the more worn ones like... if they are, I mean? But what would you say to him? I can see it's not easy when he comes back, explaining you've let a strange bloke

who knocked on your door borrow his sandals for the night."

"Tell you what; Geoff's working at the Greenhead pub down the road. Why don't you go and ask him yourself? Tell him Eileen sent you." It's a short walk to the pub and, in the sandals, cool.

"You Geoff? I've got three requests." I can't come straight to the point. "First, a lemonade and lime. And then, can I order a lasagne? Oh, and the last. It's this. I've been walking... the Path." I lift up the boots I've been dangling below the counter. "They've been giving me real gyp, and well... Eileen asked me to ask you if you still needed these?" I hoick up one leg, so he can see. "Your sandals."

Geoff is taken aback! If the hairs on his head could rise up, they would.

Now that I've cleared Carlisle, the view is opening up to the Solway Firth. Those hump-backed convulsions that the builders of Hadrian's Wall had to contend with have given way to a sprawling plain of rough pasture. But I can see no sign of the Wall. Instead, there's that most natural of boundaries between land and sea, the shore, a line not held fast, but ever re-defined by the turn of tide and whim of wind. A boundary like that keeps you on your toes. After all my sidestepping, it's one I can identify with. But that's precisely the point? My boundary has changed. My feet might have walked one boundary but, on this new one, it was attitudes that had to shift. It's holding on to them that builds the boundaries between us. ■



'Off-the-Wall Walking' by Laurence Shelley, £8.99,

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