



The Lyke Wake Walk 1974

Frankly, I have never been an addict of "Challenge Walking," but acknowledge that some mountaineers enjoy the added stimulation of attempting such epics as the Welsh 3000's, Ten Tors and, of course, collecting Munros or the highest peaks in mainland Britain all in one day! Until I tried the Lyke Wake Walk my only middle distance walk was a long day on the 'Craven Peaks', climbing Gt Whemside, Ingleborough and Pen Y Ghent.

The Lyke Wake crosses the North Yorkshire Moors at their widest and most desolate point, and runs east for some 40 miles (depending how often you get lost) from Scarth Wood Moor, near Osmotherley, to the cliffs on the coast near Ravenscar. It was the inspiration of a farmer, Bill Cowley, in 1955. A number of minor roads cross the route north to south, but there are no nearby roads alongside the route, so it is advisable to have a support party. Because of this I was able to ignore the walk for most of my mountaineering days, although it seems that never a day or night passes without someone walking it, winter or summer.

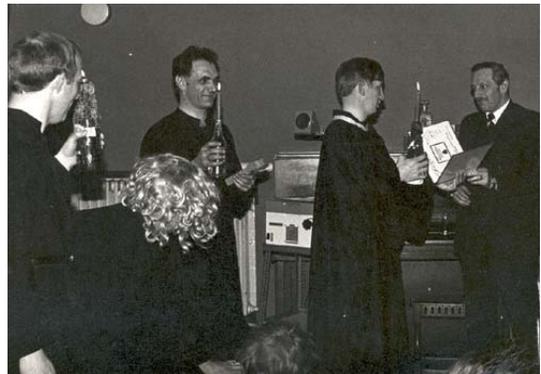
The Invitation

In 1973, I was very fortunate to secure the appointment as Deputy Commandant of a Home Office Police Training Centre at Ryton in Warwickshire, a pleasant sabbatical from the rigours of constabulary duties. Not only did I now have an interesting job with lots of recreational facilities and in a lovely setting, but being a residential centre we had a flourishing Instructors' Mess, of which I was President, ensuring a very full social life for Kathy and me.

Being in the centre of England we were ideally situated to easily arrange exchange visits with the messes of a number of other training centres in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Oxford and even Wales. Never a month passed but we held a joint mess night with our colleagues.

Standing at the bar on one very jolly occasion, when we were entertaining our colleagues from North Yorkshire, I noticed that the red-headed young sergeant next to me was wearing the tiny, discreet lapel badge which denoted that he had completed the Lyke Wake Walk, and was a 'Dirger'. Of course the conversation turned in this direction and I was told that as a voluntary extra, the students were offered, on their last weekend of training, a chance to do the walk, fully supported by the teaching staff.

The next thing I knew, I was enthusiastically invited to Dishforth for the next 'crossing', my protestations that I was far from in condition for such a venture being cheerfully waved aside. "Nothing to it - we walk at the pace of the slowest" - "We always get everyone over" - "don't worry, we'll see you get your badge", etc. etc. Perhaps it was the conviviality of the evening, but, much against my better judgment, I accepted.



The First Attempt

So it was that late on a Saturday night, I found myself amongst a large group of excited students, as our leader briefed us. Before we knew it, the school bus had deposited us at Osmotherley, where a hopeful waymarker indicated 'Ravenscar 39 miles', and at midnight we were off.

Right from the beginning of this debacle, I sensed that something was not as I had expected. The start could only be compared to the grid at Le Mans or a fell race. As we started up the steep ascent through the bracken towards the trig point on Scarth Wood Moor, the official start of the walk, I was overtaken by eager students, and occasionally pushed out of their way, so keen were they to get to Ravenscar.

Normally I would expect, on such a long walk, to start at a very modest pace, but as I was now the last walker, I had to put a spurt on in order to keep up with the party. As we walked on in the dark the lights of Cleveland on the coast were sufficient for me to read my watch. Sometime in the small hours we reached the three mile long level section along the abandoned track of Rosedale Ironstone Railway, on which much of the fortune of the North East once depended.

The only effect that this easy section had on the students was that some of them increased their pace, so that I now had to nearly run to keep up with them. At the end of the section the route leaves the track and descends steeply over rough ground to the valley of Esklets and then climbs up to gain the motor road, where our support party was waiting with breakfast at Ralph's Cross, our halfway point.

Sadly, as I started the descend, I swear that I heard a crack, and pains shot through both my thighs. I fell to the ground, writhing in genuine agony. As a 'First Aider', I found no consolation in knowing that I was only suffering from cramps in my ham strings, no doubt due to the severe pounding which they had received over that last 18 miles, and, of course, to the sudden change of pace from the

rhythm of the railway track.

I was given a pain killer, and was left in the tender care of an instructor, as the rest of the pack shinned up, past the shooting butts and an ancient stone, 'Old Margery', to gain the Castleton to Hutton le Hole road and breakfast at Ralph's Cross. Everyone was most understanding and kind. I travelled to Ravenscar in the back of the support vehicle and was soon asleep.

The Aftermath

Back at the training centre, a hot bath and lots of Sloan's Liniment made all the difference. I enjoyed a good dinner and hobbled along to the mess for the social evening. Again everyone was extremely understanding and kind. I was kept well supplied with refreshment, and never allowed to limp to the bar. As the evening wore on, I began to learn a lot more about my hosts, as they related anecdotes about past 'crossings,' and especially about the antics of the previous commandant, John Shore, with whom I was well acquainted, having met him whilst at Bramshill Staff College. A complete extrovert, he had soon succumbed to the temptations of the Lyke Wake, and for most of the evening my hosts took great pleasure in re-telling his heroic efforts, all doomed to failure. But they said that he never gave up, and, whilst they obviously admired his spirit, we spent a merry hour or so chronicling his history. "When did we carry him down from Hasty Bank?" "Remember Haggs Gate in the snow?" "When he saw Fillingsdale, he thought he was home, didn't he?" - and so it went on until bedtime. No doubt my puny efforts would provide future amusement in the mess, reminding others of the folly of elderly senior officers who aspire to join their younger brethren on a crossing of these bleak moors. Back at Ryton, I found that news of my antics had already been well publicised and had brightened Monday morning somewhat for the staff, especially as I had to attend morning parade with the aid of a walking stick. I had hardly started to open my mail when my opposite number at Dishforth rang to enquire solicitously as to my health. "You got halfway, a very good effort, you won't find me up there - it's a young mans game". I thanked him for his hospitality and, on the spur of the moment, expressed the hope that I would get farther the next time. I really thought that the line had been cut, but then, in obvious disbelief, he asked if I really wanted another go. I told him to book me a guest room for the next crossing.

I sat at my desk, easing my aching limbs, and immediately regretted my foolishness, but I knew that at coffee time in the mess at Dishforth, the news would enlighten their Monday morning.

Into Training

I had now to face the fact that, if I was not to emulate my friend John, I had less than four weeks to get fit enough to face another crossing. It didn't take many days to recover the use of my legs, and I started circuit training. I also extended our cross country run to five miles through the woods and open country behind the centre, which ended in an abandoned gravel quarry with lots of spoil heaps. The first circuit was done at a gentle pace with Suzy, my retriever, but before long she had to be left behind as I slowly built up the pressure, by increasing the pace, then jogging for a short spell, finishing off by running up and down the spoil heaps. By the end of my training, I was jogging the whole circuit, in my walking boots, carrying a 30 pound rucksack, three times a day. Of course, I was most careful to engage in this eccentric behaviour very early in the morning, again whilst everyone else was at lunch, and finally late in the evenings, when most sensible folk were relaxing in their mess. Our kindly physical training instructor, a runner, also recommended a remedy for cramps. Armed with a good supply of this elixir, I headed north at the end of the month.

The Second Attempt

I was greeted once again very warmly at Dishforth, but in the mess I wondered if some enterprising person was running a book, and what odds he was giving. At the start, I let the pack go. I had by now learned the route, so wasn't afraid of being left behind, and gently eased my muscles into a steady rhythm. My pack was much lighter than I had used in my training, and by the time that we had reached the old railway, I was ready to put a bit of a spurt on and join the leaders. At the end of the track however, I deliberately stopped for a minute before running down into the valley, to let my muscles adjust themselves to the new pace. I then climbed up into the dawn and ate a hearty breakfast at Ralph's Cross, the scene of my humiliation on the previous crossing.

On the previous walk it had all been mist and mud, but as we started again to walk east, into the rising sun, it was obvious that we were in for a warm morning, and I was glad that I had abandoned my rucksack and heavy clothing. As we followed the white boundary stones towards Shunter How, the wind blew the powdered peat of the broad track into our eyes, as we strained to catch our first sight of the white "golf balls" of the Fillingsdales Early Warning Station, near the coast.

By the time that we had crossed the railway line to Whitby, and started the long drag across Wheeldale Moor, it was obvious to our leader that the pace of the main Party was slowing down. He allowed me to join a small group led by another leader, and we slowly drew ahead until we crossed the ravine at Juggers How and climbed up for a last check in at Helwith Bridge. Making sure that the rest of the party was in sight, we then set off for the last few miles to the trig point at Wyke Point, overlooking the North Sea.

Journey's end, at last! A staff member recorded my overall time as 14 hours 5 minutes - no record, but a great sense of achievement, as the first aid team marvelled over my blemishless feet. And now it was all a jumbled collection of memories - of walking through the night under the wide, moonless but starlit sky, towards the dawn, passing ancient stone crosses with names such as Fat Betty, Old Margery, Blue Man-i'-t'-Moss, and of course Ralph's Cross. Of the first sight of Fillingsdales' welcome transmitters, far away it was true, but a confirmation that the end of the walk was getting nearer, and, of course to the cheerful companionship of staff and students, whose superb organisation had made it all possible for me. But it wasn't really quite the same!

In the Instructors' Mess that night, I was able to savour my modest triumph, as I acknowledged the very genuine congratulations of those who had made it possible. But, deep down, I knew that this evening would be different. One obvious difference was that I could now leap to the bar to try to show my appreciation, but, whilst it was in every way an enjoyable evening, I realised that there were no mentions of John's failures, which had provided so much entertainment on the last occasion. I sadly concluded that it was all my fault and we would have had a more jolly time if I had been carried down from Wheeldale Moor.

Whilst I can surely never ever be accused of being a great thinker, I have given this matter some thought, and I am persuaded to the view that it is purely a part of the English psyche to denigrate success, and to be always ready, rather, to support 'a good loser'. It isn't winning that is important to us, rather playing the game, we were taught at school. How else do we explain the prolonged absence of 'The Ashes' and The America Cup, and why we revere the catastrophic Charge of the Light Brigade, Irvine and Mallory (on Everest), and the doomed expedition of Captain Scott. I suppose that, in preparing myself so thoroughly for the walk, I had not really 'played the game' and I certainly was guilty of spoiling their innocent fun and probably of losing them money from their wagers.

This was not to be my last walk on the North Yorkshire Moors. The following month I set out with Kathy, in late afternoon, to repeat my walk at a more sensible pace. Sadly, after a bivouac at Esklets, Kathy succumbed to serious stomach cramps, and we had to abandon the walk - again - half way at Ralph's Cross.

Postscript

A few months later I left Ryton and also the Police Service to take up an appointment as a Lecturer in Law. The Commandant and all my old friends from Dishforth made quite a spectacle of the presentation of my 'Condolence Card' at my farewell party. Dressed in official robes, with a lot of unintelligible Yorkshire verse and accompanied by the 'Beast of Wheeldale Moor', they were kind enough also to present Kathy with her own trophy for getting half way. I like to think that I had been forgiven.

Further Information - [Bill Cowley's 'Lyke Wake Walk' Dalesman Publishing Co, Clapham, Yorkshire](#) (opens new window)

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