

Monday, 20th April 2015, Exe Valley Way, with Chris Buckland

Stage One, Starcross to Exeter Quay

Twas a bright and sunny Monday morning that 15 brave souls from all corners of Exmouth and East Devon converged towards Exmouth Quay where the 10:40 ferry would whisk them across the Exe to Stage I of the Exe Valley Way. Four pounds and fifty pence lighter and a bright smile from the ferryman who was beginning to believe Christmas was coming early with all this foot traffic on a usually quiet Monday, we partook a very pleasant crossing against the tide to Starcross.

Disembarkation was quickly followed by attendance to "convenience matters" after which our leader entertained us with a broad-brush description of the route we were to follow and an insightful set of rules on how to share a pathway with middle-aged men in lycra who owned expensive bicycles but were not able to afford a bell! With that conundrum in mind the walkers set off at a steady pace that was to be the norm for the day except when a hostelry was seen.

The first part of the walk was along paths and a minor road designated part of the SWCP. As we passed Powderham Castle grounds, herds of deer (small pretty fawn ones with white spots) were easily seen on one side, but the view to the estuary on other side was obstructed by the railway track.

Shortly after passing Starcross Sailing Club the road turned inland and the new cycle route started straight ahead with a magnificent new cycle/pedestrian bridge that replaced an old railway level crossing. After the bridge, pedestrians and cyclists were separated and were never to join again. We pedestrians, from our lofty perch on top of the canal bank, were able to look down smugly on the new cycle track with its ominous warning to cyclists "in case of floods, seek an alternative route". A sign prohibiting cyclists from the canal path was considered to be not helpful!

Turf Lock Hotel was now visible in the distance and the pace picked up at the thought of a coffee stop and other refreshments that may be available. Duly revived we continued along the canal path being entertained by rowers, fishermen and wild birds. At the Topsham Ferry we paused to give any tired walkers the opportunity to take an "early bath" with Plan B which involved public transport back to Exmouth. One experienced, much loved and respected lady in the party gave us all a fright by crossing over the ferry bridge. But relief was felt all around when she advised she was only finding out the opening hours of the ferry teashop. We would have felt mortified to lose such a revered walker so early in the EVW walks.

We pressed on between the canal on one side and the Exminster Marshes Nature Reserve on the other - not an area of great natural beauty especially with the ever-present drone of the M5 high on its stilts. However the weather was unbelievable with not a cloud in the sky and this kept up our spirits. The next high point, after passing the Old Sludge Beds Nature Reserve, was the sewage works where the observant could see "a ground level flare stack burning off the methane by-product of the purification process" as advised by one knowledgeable walker.

The next hurdle was the busy A379 that we had to cross at the Countess Wear canal swing bridge. Fortunately we were blessed with a traffic light controlled pedestrian crossing. Oh joy at being able to halt a stream of fast moving cars, to amble across the road and to face down the glares of the car drivers - bliss comes in small measures!

And the joy was not short lived because the awnings of the Double Lock Hotel beckoned as we again took up the canal path and lengthened our stride. Some fifteen minutes later we were able to find comfortable tables for lunch and light refreshment to quench our thirsts on this beautiful, dry, but dusty day. Lunch was of necessity a slow affair with some walkers sampling the many varieties of refreshment and others relaxing in the warm sunshine to create an idyllic lunch break.

The barking of our Leader soon brought us down to earth and we were pressed into the last three kilometers of the walk along side the ship yards and watersport facilities to Haven Banks and the Exeter Quay. After congratulations all round for a successful finish to Stage One of the Exe Valley Way and strong exhortation from our Leader about the importance of Stage Two, we said our fond farewells and departed to our public transport or to a local teashop where the high points of the day's walk were relived. In particular, no one could ever recall walking so far without a discernable hill. OVA walkers are not used to such luxury.

Many thanks to Chris for organising and leading this walk.

"Back marker"
23 April 2015