

Sunday, 26th July 2015, High Willhayes with Chris Buckland

"Lessons Learned the Hard Way"

On a wet Sunday morning five stalwart members of the OVA Walk Section set out to climb the two highest peaks in Southern England. This was in spite of an appalling weather forecast and distinctly menacing weather on the horizon, but it was reasonably warm.

We all duly arrived at Okehampton station, two walkers by car and the others by the weekly Sunday train service from Exeter, to enjoy a brief spell of bright sunshine and blue skies. Our spirits rose as we discussed the merits of wet weather gear and held the weather forecasters up to ridicule. After a last minute "convenience stop" at the station we set off at a cracking pace with our spirits high. Up the hill and over a very noisy A30, some 40 to 50 feet below, and across a meadow loosing out to brambles and bracken. Then onwards to the tarmac road that leads to the Okehampton Army camp and on to the track that leads to Rotor, the first of the four tors of the day.

By this time the weather was looking less promising with clouds boiling on the horizon, but we were maintaining a good pace. Our spirits were high as we reached the bridge by the road to the Army barracks when one of the walkers complained that they were overheating - layers were duly removed. About 4km further on the rain started, gently at first and then the wind came to whip up a nice squall and to lower the temperature. At this point she who had removed layers was deciding whether to reinstate them when the cry went up "I've left my camera at the Bridge". Panic ensued briefly until the leader restored order by directing the party to continue onwards uphill under the leadership of yours truly whilst he (the leader) accompanied the hapless individual back down hill to retrieve the camera. The party continued uphill in shrieking wind and rain and finally took shelter in a "bomb crater" to wait out the arrival of the leader and photographer complete with camera.

After what seemed to be an interminably long period (5 to 10 mins) we were all together again and we continued uphill at a gentler pace to Rowtor during which time the weather had abated considerably.

After a short period during which we congratulated ourselves 'one down and three to go', the cloud cover broke and we could see West Mill Tor. The path down hill and up the other side was quickly accomplished, although there was precious little to see en route.



Rotor - 'One down three to go'



West Mill Tor

At the top of West Mill Tor it was wet and cold because there was very little shelter from the wind. As we took shelter huddled behind rocks, there was a brief break in the rain and we could see Yes Tor our next goal. Our leader scanned the horizon, called on his ancestors' spirits and declared there would be no rain for the next hour and was prepared to take wagers on the outcome. There were no takers, the rest of the party were concerned that the Leader was having some kind of episode or had indeed taken leave of his senses. But the rain did stop!



We pressed on down the hill across boggy ground saturated by the rain and, needing nifty footwork, crossed a shallow ford fortunately not swollen by the rain and climbed slowly up the other side to the top of Yes Tor - one more to go. The climb was not strenuous, but the developing hunger pangs and cold made everyone focus on getting to the top as soon as possible. Our intrepid photographer snapped away at some horses sensibly standing in the lee of the tor.

We took the hint, headed in their

direction and tucked down behind some rocks for lunch whilst our leader and photographer headed to the very top to engage in conversation with a solitary walker, probably to give the poor fellow the OVA membership sales pitch!

Solitary Trig Point on Yes Tor



After lunch was a relatively flat, easy and quick walk to High Willhayes. This tor is always a bit of a disappointment to the writer because there is nothing spectacular about the top. There are even doubts about which pile of rocks is the peak, so we visited them all.



***this pix by chris
all others by stella***

After a brief motivating talk from the leader, and an acknowledgement that fine rain had indeed come within the hour and so he lost his bet, we set out for the Okemont River and the Tarka Trail. To save time, we eschewed the track and did some rough moor walking cutting off some of the larger corners.

The downhill walk was fast and we arrived at the river after only one minor navigational hiccup, and began our walk alongside the river. The Tarka Trail is very pretty and spectacular in parts and all the more exiting because the rocks upon which we were walking were slippery after the rain. We exited the trail and embarked on a new route to the station because the bridleway we normally used was closed for repairs and the posted alternative was much longer and time was very tight. We had twenty minutes to walk over a mile to get to the station on time.

Unfortunately the path was anything but flat. It was constant uphill with steep bits in places and soon we were spread out with the front pack now out of sight on the bends. The 'tortoises' at the back noticed a short cut across a meadow to the bridge over the A30 and presumed that the 'hares' had taken this route. In summary the 'tortoise' at the back got to the station in time for his ginger beer and to catch the last train of the week whilst the 'hares' had to walk about an extra mile and so missed the train. Fortunately all was not lost since there were sufficient seats in the car for all and an embarrassment was avoided.

All felt a sense of accomplishment and a few lessons were learned about tight timescales and the impact of unexpected events.

Our thanks go to our 'hairy' leader for getting us up the hills and safely back down again.

Backmarker
2nd August 2015