

Friday, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2015, Castle Neroche with Iain Ure

*"Indiana Jones and the lost castle"*

It had been a very wet week and it was still raining at breakfast time on Friday. Not the ideal day to go walking! But an OVA outing beckoned and we had, after all, promised we'd be there since we'd missed last year's classic walk at Castle Neroche. The weather forecast was for the rain to move east during the morning in the direction of the planned walk, an hour's drive away so we arrived early, planning to return home at the allotted start time if no one else had turned up. But the intrepid Leader arrived shortly afterwards and then we were put to shame by a couple who had driven all the way there from Reigate in Surrey! In heavy rain, seven soggy stalwarts set off in an easterly circuit of the earthworks.



The Leader informed us that he would save the fort until the end of the hike, no doubt fearful that if we "notched up Neroche" at this point, some of us might be tempted to slip back to the car park and make our escape! We strode along a track that marked the outer ramparts of the site and stopped near Castle Farm which afforded tantalising views through the rain clouds. Our spirits rose as the rain eased off and the Autumn colours, in vibrant shades of yellow through to

brown and bronze in the trees and beneath our feet, were stunning. A lively pace was adopted and in Middleroom wood, coats were packed away as the rain stopped. The view towards Taunton Vale was uplifting and at Forest Farm we admired the local stonework consisting of Blue Lias and honey-coloured blockwork. However, further challenges arose with the crossing of what must have been just a trickling stream when the route was recently "recce'd" but had now turned into a raging torrent! We stormed across bravely, collecting the odd boot full of water, but were promised a coffee stop to encourage us onward. In a village not named on the map, but proudly christened Curland by a passing local, we sat beneath a tree on a thoughtfully placed bench to assist one walker with a soggy sock who had a blister. The offer of a quick amputation was politely refused and the unworldly would-be-surgeon was informed that the patient's blackened toes were simply displaying the latest trend in nail varnish!

Passing Curland Equestrian School (confirming the name of the village), we had to "Ford" another stream that also had ambitions to be a river which brought to mind the actor who starred in the Indiana Jones adventures. Now my imagination was really fired, encouraged by the Leader's tale of a giant



who was annoyed with the locals and from his vantage point at Castle Neroche, had thrown four boulders onto the next village. In Staple Fitzpaine we saw the rocks, all neatly aimed to fall in the four corners of the crossroads, to avoid causing any obstruction, so he can't have been that angry! The Greyhound pub was made of the same fine stonework and the village had a large church with an ornate tower which we visited (to pray for better weather?). We saw a large flock of starlings looking like a swarm of bees whirling about. Someone said, in avian terms, this

was referred to as a "murmuration", strictly correct if a little pretentious!

Reaching the lunch stop, no sooner had we settled down to eat, crowded onto an orange box-sized bench, than the heavens opened with the heaviest downpour thus far. With my spirits now properly dampened, someone who knew that I was an amateur lepidopterist confidently informed me that I would soon see some butterflies. In November? In the rain? Really? At the entrance to the Mount Fancy Farm Reserve, butterflies were in abundance, in beautiful illustrations on the information board. Still, I was fascinated that the reserve boasted the scarce Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary and what appeared to be a jet black butterfly (the Chimney Sweeper) which is actually an uncommon day-flying moth. Definitely worth returning to in the summertime!

Now back in movie character, and feeling more confident, we crossed four more frothing, treacherous watercourses (slight exaggeration here). We passed through Staple Common (Forestry Commission) where a few authentic "mealy-mouthed" Exmoor ponies were grazing. I was told this is the appropriate term to describe the yellow markings around their muzzles and eyes, indicative of a primitive trait



called pangaré. An unnecessarily prolonged discussion took place as to whether a cloud bank was in fact the distant Quantock Hills, but the rest of us simply wanted to see the elusive hill-top fort. Finally we climbed up the 2,600 year old earth ramparts and, suitably bedraggled and plastered in mud, we assembled for an authentic Iron Age group photograph!

A memorable walk with wonderful views and expertly planned. Please include in next year's programme.

**David Hatch**  
**7 November 2015**