

Friday May 25th 2018, “If the Cap fits” with Chris Buckland

Golden Cap is a popular and prestigious location in the much sought after area of West Dorset. It is the highest point on the south coast at 191 metres, and with its unusual table-top topography, is an iconic landmark on the Jurassic Coast, where its brooding presence is visible for many miles. From the summit, views of Lyme Bay are unsurpassed. But the 14 OVA Walkers who climbed Golden Cap on the 25th May don't need an 'estate agent' to sell it to them!

Today there was a hint of sea-mist that made identification of some distant places more difficult, as if The Cap was deliberately withholding some of its delights. We knew where Portland 'should' be, but were we seeing images from our past experiences, and is that Lambert's Castle, and where is Colmer's Hill? Near by, Seatown, West Bay and the Chesil Beach snaked off to the east, and Charmouth and Lyme Regis were within touching distance to the west.



But we had to get there first, so our expectant group set off from sea level at the Charmouth Heritage Centre for the first cliff climb of the day, the 148 metre high Cain's Folly. From the top, the circularity of our largely high level 7.5 mile walk that lay ahead, could be viewed. Still more climbing to do as we took the “Smuggler's Path” through a tunnel of scrub, to emerge on the chalk downland of Stonebarrow Hill and the ridge walk to the top of Chardown Hill for coffee, and the opportunity to absorb the constant stimulation of our senses.

Half a mile below was the sea where a familiar pleasure boat was plying its trade between Exmouth and West Bay, while above us was the not very Golden Cap, imperiously awaiting our assault.



At our feet were a plethora of wild flowers, some so small and insignificant that had our resident experts digging into their accumulated wisdom to identify them. Fortunately we could still enjoy an abundance of Bluebells, Greater Stichwort, Red Campion, Speedwell, Thistle, Vetch and more besides. Butterflies and the occasional, not to be outdone, Moth, flitted among us. One unresolved query was posed by the presence of a multitude of Tadpoles in the water trough that served as an impromptu seat for some of us. Can frogs jump three feet into the trough to lay their spawn? And how did they jump out with nothing to jump off? Are all those young frogs due for an inescapable drowning because they cannot get out?

We headed toward the sea keeping a safe distance from some magnificent grazing horses, silhouetted against the blue sea, as we approached them from above.



Next, through a field swathed in buttercups that painted our boots in bright yellow pollen. Before our final ascent we lingered in the mediaeval hamlet of Stanton St Gabriel, dated at 1087 and consisting of the roofless remains of a 13 Century church, an 18 Century Manor House, now preserved by the National trust as holiday flats, and a 19 Century once restored, but now sadly neglected again, sheep dip.

So, with a skip and a leap we reached our destination. Cameras and binoculars to the fore, and then we dropped off the summit to eat our lunch, some sat on the benches provided, others with their legs down the hill, but everyone could enjoy seeing the Coast Path that would be our return route and a reminder of the first half of our journey, all laid out in front of our eyes.



It turned out to be a good spot to watch others toiling up the foothills of The Cap, who were often glad to stop for a word, before their last push for the top. Some were on holiday, making their first visit, for others who lived locally, this was their playground, a few were attempting the whole 630 miles of memories. One was Graham who had come up from Lands End and was walking home to Bournemouth, and who included the 600 mile Compestala de Sandiago on his CV. The new, soon to be completed All England Coast Path in 2020, is already in his sights. It was also a good place to capture potential members for the SWCP Association and several leaflets were handed over!

By now the early cloud cover had dispersed and we enjoyed hot sunshine and 23 degrees, for the 3 miles of undulating, but never very steep, path to Charmouth. A feature was the cliff top fields that had all been left to seed with carpets of buttercups, daisies and, hiding away, purple orchids that were a delight.



Much evidence of cliff erosion and land slips, although none seemed very recent, and were probably a legacy of the 2014/15 and 2015/16 winters that were so damaging. In some places it was obvious that a slip was waiting to happen.

The less than two hours went quickly and at 3 o'clock we reached Charmouth. Time for tea and cake and an opportunity to reflect on how it is that such an individualist human activity as walking, whose solitude, when carried out alone, can allow one to be totally absorbed with oneself, but when carried out with a group of like minded, compatible people can be so sociable and such a positive force for good mental health, for which, I for one, am grateful.

Chris Buckland