

OVER THE PEAK WITH ALFIE 'A SUMMER SPECIAL'

This is not intended as a walk guide

For a few years now I have harboured a dream – to walk across the Peak District. Being some 27 miles or so, the route I had in mind was considerably more than my usual Sunday stroll, and would be better if carried out in a couple of stages. I also decided that it might be a good idea to have another human being for company as well as my little canine friend. However, not many of my family and friends seemed keen on the idea or had the time to go with me, so my dream was put on hold for some time. But then my sister came to the rescue and agreed to accompany Alfie and me. My dream was about to be realized so out came the map to plot the exact route and the preparations began.

My sister, Jackie Ellis, is a seasoned worldwide traveller. Among the adventures that she and husband Richard have had were exploring Easter Island on horseback; marching across Madagascar; climbing a mountain in Borneo in the dark to see the sun rise over the south China sea; descending a silver mine in Bolivia and flying over Angel Falls in Venezuela. And that is just the tip of the iceberg – did I mention sleeping in an ice hotel, camping out in the Amazon jungle or snorkelling off the paradise island of Bora Bora? Jackie has a map of the world on her bedroom wall covered with a multitude of pins in the places they have visited. If I did that, there would be a big hole in England and Wales!

Our adventure began on 17th June when we were dropped off at the side of the A53 next to the gritstone circle close to Upper Hulme, which marks the western boundary of the Peak District National Park. Our mission on Day One was to make our way up to the Mermaid Inn then across Staffordshire to the Derbyshire border, passing through Elkstone, Warslow, Hulme End and to Raikes Farm on the outskirts of Hartington some 11 or so miles away, where we were booked in for bed and breakfast.



The walk got off to a shaky start when I managed to get us lost a couple of times trying to find the route up to Hurdlow Farm. Conditions were extremely hot and sticky – a bit too warm for Alfie and me, but not a problem for my sun loving Sis.

The moors and grassy meadows are a breeding ground for insects, and I was soon being bitten by large flies injecting into my soft pale skin – yuk! I reeked with insect repellent and glistened with sun tan lotion.

Onwards and upwards we strolled, chatting as we went – this walk was to be a rare opportunity for a good natter and a bit of sisterly bonding.

Centuries ago, and before the age of steam trains, the track we followed up the hillside was an old drovers road from Cheshire to Nottingham, passing through Winster where there were regular cattle fairs. We could clearly make out the deeply hollowed path where countless bullocks and beasts, sheep and geese were marched to the markets and famous Nottingham Goose Fair.

On reaching the top of the hill, we walked past the millennium beacon and into the car park of The Mermaid Inn where we had hoped to order morning coffee. The doors didn't open until 12 though and there was over an hour to go, so we sat on the wall to admire the view for a few minutes and sipped away at our water bottles – Alfie included! Suddenly around the corner of the pub came a little cluster of army cadets in combat gear with camouflage paint over their faces. They were obviously practising silent manoeuvres because not a word was spoken and they conversed with each other in strange sign language and touches. An army training camp and firing range are located on the moors close by, and it is not unusual to see soldiers of all ages in the area. The cadets gave us a personal display of their skills, hiding under the wall side before creeping up on some pretend enemy using their imaginary guns, then disappearing quietly into the moors.

The Mermaid Inn, formerly Blakemere House is a fascinating building which is remarkably untouched. There are a couple of tall lamps either side of the doorway which give it the appearance of Dixon of Dock Green, although I have been told that the pub recently featured in an episode of Dalziel and Pascoe!



This old drovers inn takes its name from Blake Mere a mile or so to the north which is also known as the Mermaid's Pool. It is said that the bottomless pond contains a Mermaid who at the stroke of midnight would entice any passing travellers, as recorded in the following: 'She calls on you to greet her, combing her dripping crown, and if you go to meet her, she ups and drags you down'. The mermaid story dates back to 1679 when a woman pedlar travelling this way from Leek market to Bakewell market was robbed and strangled by an ostler from Leek named Andrew Simpson, who then threw her body into the Mere.

After a short rest it was time to continue and we crossed the road and headed off on a quiet little lane for Elkstone. The road sign to guide us was rather interesting because it featured a parachuting sheep and from all the indentations, had obviously been used as target practice.



The views from this quiet country lane were far reaching and spectacular and it was to be downhill nearly all the way from now on. Upper and Lower Elkstone are lovely little hamlets set in fabulously rich countryside. Organic hay meadows swayed all around in the gentle breeze whilst the hedgerows and grass verges were dripping with a multitude of wild flowers and blossom. Fat healthy cattle lazed around chewing the cud whilst the skies were full of the sounds of larks and curlew.

When we crossed Warslow Brook, Alfie climbed down the bank into the icy cold waters and paddled around beneath the shade of overhanging trees, cooling his paws and playing with stones on the riverbed, whilst Jackie and I took the chance to picnic.

I had noticed from the start of the walk that her rucksack was decidedly smaller than mine. I now discovered that it contained only a bottle of water, designer sunglasses, mobile phone, and a single round of marmite sandwiches. 'Sherpa' Sally on the other hand looked like a candidate for the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme with comprehensive first aid kit, map, binoculars etc; a flask for me and 4 pints of water for Alfie, not to mention a carrier bag of food – walking does wonders for my appetite!

Happily refreshed we all continued on our way like a scene from an Enid Blyton's Famous Five story, lacking only the boys and lashings of ginger beer! We now had to cross a series of fields and stiles to Warslow, from where we dropped down a lane heading for Ecton.

After a while we crossed over a stile and walked over a field dotted with hillocks and hollows – remnants of the mining era which once decimated the countryside hereabouts. We stood for a while looking across at Ecton Hill which rises to a height of 1212 feet and down to the valley below which at one time was a thriving industrial site with mines, mills and machinery, but is now an idyllic dale which attracts many visitors. The famous Ecton copper was thought to have been discovered by the Romans who found the secret golden metal hidden beneath the hillside opposite, although the first established workings here were in the mid 17th century. The introduction of gunpowder lead to an increase in the mines activity, and by 1764 the mineral rights belonged to the Duke of Devonshire. The 5th Duke is said to have built the crescent at Buxton on Ecton's profits.

There were 50 miners employed at Ecton in its heyday and as many women who broke up the ore with 'buckers' or flat-headed hammers. Girls and boys of 8 to 12 were also set on to sort the ore. By 1850 Deep Ecton mine had reached a depth of 1380 feet from the top of the hill. It was one of the deepest mines in Europe and extremely dangerous. One of the arched entrances opens into a large cavern where the 'floor' is said to resemble a huge copper-green pool of water. This however covers a submerged shaft some 960 feet deep.

Alfie, Jackie and I now followed the footpath down through a lovely little wood to join cyclists and fellow walkers on the Manifold Way.

By the time we reached Hulme End we were ready for another rest, the temperature was well in the 70's and we had plenty of time to spare. Firstly we called at the lovely little Visitor Centre which tells you all about the now defunct Manifold Light Railway, and has benches named after the little halts or stations along its route. Then we walked around to Hulme End Village Store, a rarity in this age of the supermarket and Spar! We sat on a seat in the neatly manicured garden and Eric the shopkeeper brought us out a couple of enormous, delicious and deep egg custards, ice cool from the fridge, together with freshly made tea. It might not have been served in a fancy pot, but it was the best tasting tea ever! Alfie fell asleep under the picnic table away from the hot sun and was soon chasing imaginary rabbits, whilst I checked my heels for blisters.

From Hulme End, we had to walk by the side of the busy road for a while, but we soon reached our destination at Raikes Farm, where Alan and Valerie Shipley with their black Labrador Misty were waiting to greet us to their 16th century traditional farmhouse.

Our cosy room contained temptingly comfortable twin beds, but before we could slip between the crisp linen sheets, we showered and spruced ourselves up then headed for the hotspots of Hartington!

It was almost a mile from the farm to the centre of the village which gave us the chance to work up an appetite for our evening meal. The seats outside the Devonshire Arms looked rather appealing as we could watch the sun setting in the distance. Besides, Alfie had taken a fancy to a couple of girlie dogs seated close by, so he was happy. Being a lovely warm summers evening there were many visitors and locals wandering around and crossing the road between the Devonshire and Charles Cotton.

Choosing from the menu was not a difficult decision as I decided to treat myself and plumped for a fillet steak in Hartington Stilton sauce which was the dearest meal on the menu but worth every penny and was cooked to perfection. We washed down our meal with a couple of pints of Guinness to give us energy and a bottle of chilled wine.

Walking back to Raikes Farm in the twilight was euphoric but a bit of a blur, this was a day we were not going to forget for years to come, and who knew what Day Two of our mission would bring.

As we settled down to sleep side by side in our comfy little beds it was just like we were young girls again, but there was no chatting into the early hours as we were both so shattered we fell instantly asleep. Alfie lay flat out on the floor by my side on his own little blanket too tired to care that he was miles from home.

DAY 2

I awoke at about 6am to the sounds of my sister gently snoring alongside. It had also disturbed Alfie and he trotted to the side of her bed, rested his chin on the duvet about two inches from Jackie's face and gave her his cutest expression with ears pricked. Thank goodness I had given him a bath the night before we had left home and brushed his teeth well!

Fortunately she continued to sleep! My sister is not a dog lover; in fact she admitted that she had dreaded the thought of having to spend a night in the same room as Alfie. I have always been the animal appreciator in the family with numerous pets as a child including hamsters, rabbits, gerbils, sticks insects and a guinea pig, whereas Jackie was more likely to have been found with her nose in a book or off playing with her friends. Imagine the horror therefore if she had woken to find a furry face and damp nose so close – the screams would have been heard for miles!

Before he could give Jackie one of his slurpy kisses, I gently called Alfie away and decided it was an ideal opportunity to take him outside. I peeped through the little cottage window to check on the weather which looked promising for the day ahead, and out across a croft where the 'set aside' long grass full of buttercups and ox-eye daisies contained a little family of pheasant chicks with their protective mother.

Alfie and I went for a quick walk to stretch our legs – literally! For a short distance we resembled mummy woodentop and spotty dog, yesterday had been much further than our normal stroll.

Breakfast at Raikes Farm was a veritable 'Full English' feast using only the best local ingredients including sausage, bacon, oatcake and hunky wholemeal toast. Valerie and Alan had made us so welcome, we felt like part of the family – funnily enough we discovered during our chats that we are in fact distantly connected through marriage and association. When it was time to go I could quite happily have hugged them for their kindness. Alfie gave Misty a Maoris kiss (they touched noses) whilst Jackie and I set off down the drive. With Valerie's packed lunches tucked into our rucksacks we were like little girls being waved off to school.

We by-passed Hartington, instead heading up a little grassy track just before the village, being one of a maze of narrow lanes which run between fields where cows and calves contentedly graze with the occasional bull for entertainment. We eventually emerged opposite Hartington Hall on the road to Heathcote.

At the next junction was Heathcote Mere where coots and their chicks played hide and seek among the rushes, reeds and flag iris. There are records dating back to 1482 of the existence of this clay lined pond which is reputedly older than the mere in the centre of Hartington.



We continued up the road to Heathcote then on to a bridge where we dropped down a path to the Tissington Trail and made our way to Hartington Station, keeping under the side to avoid the many cyclists. When visiting the ladies toilet I was interested to see a sign requesting that people refrain from washing their boots in the sink – it should be part of the countryside code!

Jackie, Alfie and I left the Trail by the exit road and headed straight up the hill and onto fabulous Green Lane which crossed the A515 on the summit. This track would take us directly to Middleton-by-Youlgreave several miles away, and is yet another ancient route steeped in history and oozing atmosphere.

It was extremely quiet, with no other walkers. Occasionally the silence was broken by the sounds of tractors cutting long hay fields close by into geometric swathes.



By the time we reached Middleton it was lunchtime and we sat on seats near the centre of the village and extracted Valerie's packs. She had done us proud with home boiled ham with mustard and cheese with pickle sandwiches, a little bag of mixed salad, a banana and a small pack of biscuits each. We might have burned off some calories on our walk, but there was no way either of us would have lost any weight!

As we rested, we noticed several cars darting around with people dashing about. We were then approached by a man who eagerly asked us if we were local. He explained that there was a treasure hunt going through several north Derbyshire villages and one of the questions was proving to be particularly hard. "It might be a kettle but what is the gift?" As there are no tearooms in Middleton the contestants were stumped. Jackie and I knew the answer though, and pointed the man in the direction of Diane Kettle's cottage – she is a local artist and displays her work and gift cards in the window of her home. Gushing with gratitude the man quickly disappeared.

After a little laze in the sunshine, we decided it was time to resume our walk and attempted to get up from the seat, only to find that our bums were quite stuck thanks to blobs of sticky sap that had dripped from the lime tree above!

Jackie and I with a tiring little Alfie descended to Bradford Dale where we looked for a quiet spot, devoid of ducks and dippers, to let him have a paddle and cool down. The weather forecast for Sunday had promised unbroken sunshine with temperatures hitting the 80's. If that had been true our walk could well have been abandoned because 15 miles in that heat would have been too much for my fur-coated friend. As it was, the forecasters were quite wrong and the weather was mild and occasionally overcast – perfect walking conditions, with our goal of reaching Rowsley being a distinct possibility.

Jackie was amused by Alfie's antics and commented several times on the walk on how well-behaved he was, and even ventured as far as to give him a fuss or hold his lead – my clever little dog is extremely astute and knew exactly how to worm his way into her affections.

Bradford Dale was a delight as we wearily wandered on the riverside path. I was a bit annoyed however when we reached the clapper bridge to see what looked like an old shed in the river, I assumed to have been thrown in by vandals. It then dawned on me that the sections of wood weighed down with heavy stones were in fact the

frames of Youlgreave well dressings being soaked in preparation before the clay is attached and petalling begins later in the month.



Just before we arrived at Alport we noticed a conservation area by the side of the river, which is currently fenced off to try and encourage unusual and rare flowers to establish. I kept Alfie well away and hope that other dog owners do the same, as it will be nice in time to come to return and see how successful the project has been.

After walking through the quaint little hamlet of Alport with its chocolate box cottages and riverside gardens, we followed a path toward Harthill Hall standing on Priests Hill. Now a luxurious holiday complex, the hall with its mullioned and transomed windows was once the home of Edmund Cockayne who it is said fought at Shrewsbury against Hotspur and was knighted on the field. However, he was killed in action that same morning and is known as being 'Knight for an hour'.

We then had to walk along a short section of the main road to just before Hawley's Bridge. From here my route headed up a series of steps through woodland then across fields to Stanton-in-the-Peak. It was getting on for 4 o'clock and our pace was slowing down. The thought of a cool shandy at the Flying Childers encouraged us the last few hundred yards like a scene from 'Ice Cold in Alex'. Horror upon horror though – the pub had shut at 3! Out came our drinking bottles and we downed the last sips of lukewarm water.

The Flying Childers is named after the Derby winner trained by Sir Hugh Childers, and owned by the Duke of Devonshire. It was reputedly his fastest horse.

Wearily, we headed past the school on a path which dropped down through fields and pasture to Congreave, then along a further footpath to Rowsley. We looked a tired little trio sitting on a bench outside The Peacock when our lift arrived to scoop us up and take us home. Alfie was ready for the comfort of his beanbag, but within a few hours was eagerly expecting his evening walk, none the worse for his adventure.

With a trek up through the Himalayas planned for September, Jackie will be reaching far greater heights than the peaks of the Peak, but even she had to admit that our weekend together had been very special.

I was rather proud of our achievement, and should have called my article the 'Century Walk' because our joint ages actually add up to 100! Thanks to my brilliant Sis my dream of walking across the Peak District had come true.

As for Alfie and myself, our Sunday strolls will hopefully continue for some time to come, but I've already started planning the next 'Special' – watch this space!

Sally Mosley