

# Two Men and a Spoon go Hill Walking

By

Keith Pugsley

With technical assistance, support and  
companionship from  
Iain Ferguson

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# Forward

**Which is about the best advice I can give anyone contemplating coastal hill walking. Go forwards, keep one eye on the path and one on the sea. And even if this does make you cross-eyed, you will eventually get there.**

**This is an account of two men and an order spoon walking in Devon and Cornwall. It's packed with adventure, acts of heroism and derring-do, with a smattering of drunkenness and debauchery.**

**It's also a treasure chest, a veritable mine of practical information and useful tips for the walker, both amateur and seasoned professional. Probably.**

**So without further delay, come, turn a page, walk with No.13, Iain and me along the South West Coast Path.**

**Keith Pugsley  
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## **1. A FEASIBILITY STUDY LEADING TO AN OPTION APPRAISAL**

**Nobody takes me seriously. Maybe it's because of my slightly off-beat sense of humour, or the relentless and unending bullshit that has characterised my conversation over the last sixty years, but whatever it is, it's been the bane of my life and a serious impediment to an otherwise inspirational career. Probably. People just don't believe a thing I say, even when I'm trying to be serious.**

**Which is why I was so utterly flattered and surprised when I suggested to Iain Ferguson that we might take a walk together down the South West Coast Path. He both agreed immediately that this would be a good idea, and indicated enthusiastically that he would hold me to the offer. A kind of partnership was forged right then, over a couple of pints of Burton ale in a pub in Newton Abbot in the autumn of 2009.**

**Now, we are quite different in background and circumstance, Iain and I. He's the tall, rangy laid-back laconic type, softly spoken, kindly in manner, gentle by disposition. An engineer turned software designer, he lives on the south Devon coast, with partner Laraine, in an idyll on a hill in Teignmouth called Hilbré. I, on the other hand, being made of stouter and shorter stuff, inhabit the wilds of the much more testing north Devon, where I help Gilly tend to our menagerie of fifty rescued farm animals, trimming hooves, performing feats of do-it-yourself rough veterinary surgery and, prosaically, shovelling dung. I'm short, ever so slightly overweight, and ever so slightly short tempered, irascible, impatient, always in a hurry and, as my wife Gilly will tell you if she can get a word in edgeways, I can talk for England. A retired solicitor, retired clinical hypnotherapist, now trying my hand as a life coach, I'm actually a grumpy old man with an opinion on everything that moves, or rather doesn't. Iain has learnt better. He knows by now that "it's all bollocks." I'm learning from him.**

**On the walking front, Iain's semi-pro. He's done many of the stretches of the South West Path and ventured forth often unaccompanied to explore several other parts of the country.**

I'm a rank beginner, a trainee, the quintessential tea boy in the long distance path walking stakes. I think I hiked five miles near Hastings as a Boy Scout nearly fifty years ago, and I've taken the dog for the odd walk since. But that's the extent of my experience. Not so much as an "O" level.

So would we be compatible as a walking partnership? Would we get on? Would Iain's superior strolling expertise and walking know-how be held back by my inexperience, my ageing limbs and frame, my history of sciatica and gout, my short gait, my irritating sense of humour?

These were all considerations, at least on my part, as the autumn wore on and I half hoped that Iain had forgotten my suggestions made in the beery haze of Newton Abbot.

But he hadn't. As the evenings lengthened and Christmas approached, Iain returned to the subject of the South West Path. We should plan our route, provision our rucksacks, get match fit and do all the other things that two middle aged men finding themselves need to do. We should have a planning session.

So I dug out my trusty flip chart and easel, made a flask of coffee and some sandwiches. Iain, more helpfully perhaps, brought some maps and train timetables. On 17<sup>th</sup>. December 2009 we huddled around the log burner in the snug at Long Lane Farm and planned our adventure. We each had a copy of the official South West Coast Path Guide, 2001 edition, Iain's a relic of earlier forays into darkest Devon and over the border into post colonial Cornwall. Mine had been an idle dreamy purchase from a charity shop about five years ago. I thought reading about the path would be a cheap substitute for actually walking it. Anyway, we were both reading from the same script, as it were, and after some exchange of preferences and taking account of the practicalities, came up with the following working walking plan.

1. We would set off on Wednesday 24 March 2010, straddle British Summer Time on Sunday 28 March, and finish on or before Thursday 1 April.
2. The route would be Newquay to Porthcothan (11.1 miles), and overnight there. Then Porthcothan to

Trevone (7.9) and Trevone to Padstow (5.7) to overnight again. Next Padstow on the Rock Ferry to Rock and on to Polzeath (2.9) followed by Polzeath to Port Isaac (8.8 “strenuous”) to stay at Port Isaac over night. Port Isaac to Tintagel is a “severe” 9.1 miles, so we would stop at Tintagel to gather our resources before making for Boscastle (4.9) and Crackington Haven (a further 6.8 miles of “strenuousness”) to over night there. The final stage of Crackington Haven to Bude is 10.2 miles “strenuous”, but there we could be picked up and recover in the respective bosoms of our loved ones.

3. Walking apparel, as advised by Iain, should include good but worn-in walking boots, proprietary walking socks, light walking trousers, light shirt and jumper, storm jacket with hood or appropriate headwear, gloves.
4. We should carry on or about us a light but strong rucksack containing the following:

- Ø Light shoes one pair
- Ø Disposable evening socks
- Ø Cotton shirts three of
- Ø Evening trousers
- Ø Disposable underwear
- Ø Pyjamas
- Ø Mobile phone, duly charged
- Ø Camera
- Ø Cash, say £200
- Ø Credit and debit cards
- Ø Tubigrips
- Ø Walking stick (optional)
- Ø Maps
- Ø Journal (in my case)
- Ø Plasters
- Ø Medication
- Ø Tea tree oil (Iain swears this will get you out of any dire emergency from sun stroke to major intrusive surgery and kerbside amputation)
- Ø Disposable razor
- Ø Tooth brush and paste
- Ø A book to amuse
- Ø Water bottle

**Ø My Swiss Army Knife with at least 34 blades and attachments**

- 5. We should factor in a “training walk” so that the more inexperienced in the team, i.e.me, can be sure we are up for the major event, and to iron out any difficulties. We agreed to do this in early February, at least a month before the walk proper.**

**I undertook to surf the internet and to book B. & B. accommodation at suitable locations along the way, and to report to the Group Captain (Iain) when this was done.**

**Our planning session had proved to be a masterpiece of co-operative teamwork. I was much encouraged for the future of our venture.**

**oooOooo**

**Iain and Laraine spent the Winterfest with us at Long Lane Farm, and on the eve of Winterfest we had a brief catch up on the plans. All the accommodation stop-overs had been arranged, so that we would have a target to head for on each day. Iain undertook to Google the hostelrys, and to print off localised maps with the postcodes provided. I proudly presented the walking gear I had obtained, principally presents from the much beloved bestowed on me to celebrate my stupendous adventure. And the Winterfest, of course. They included two pairs of proper walking socks, a Peter Storm jacket, and my bargain basement rucksack.**

**“What about boots?” enquired the cautious Iain.**

**“Oh, I’ve got some boots already. Got them from a charity shop. Only two quid. Perfect fit and very strong. They’ve even been worn in for me, by their previous owners,” I assured him.**

**“Two quid’s very good. I paid over £100 for mine, and that was ten years ago,” retorted Iain, looking at me a little askance.**

**“Well, I know you gets what you pays for, but in my experience these charity shops are very good, you know. Most of what you see me wearing right now is from a charity shop.”**

**“I see.” He still looked at me askance. Perhaps he’s a little short sighted, I thought, or hard of hearing. I filled his glass, offered him another mince pie.**

## 2. PUGSLEY GETS HIS “0” LEVEL

The new year came and went, as it always does. I was booked on an introductory course on wood carving, and spent a jolly five days in the company of co-student, the charming T.V. presenter Adam Hart-Davis. Under the instruction of teacher Zoë Gertner in the wilds of woolly Holsworthy, I fashioned a rudimentary hedgehog and rustic stylised sheep out of some unsuspecting sycamore logs. Meanwhile Iain was involved with his amateur dramatic group camping it up as Sternum in an obscure version of Little Red Riding Hood. Anyway, by February, our personal commitments fulfilled, it was time to firm up on the training walk to see whether I was truly up for this challenge.

So it's 17 February 2010 and I find myself jogging along the main road from Teignmouth to Torquay on the 32T in the mid February murk. The route of our training walk has been arranged with convenience in mind. Torquay harbour to the ferry at Shaldon, some 10.8 miles “strenuous” along the picturesque and largely afforested south Devon coast. And then across the bridge and home to Iain's house in Thornley Drive.

I travelled to Teignmouth the previous afternoon, and was treated by Iain to a couple of miles “acclimatisation” along the Teignmouth sea wall, culminating in three or four pints of strong Otter Head beer at the Ship Inn (all part of the syllabus, Iain assured me) and a trainee climb up the steep hill to Hilbré, where it nestles comfortably in the cliffs overlooking the mouth of the Teign. I'm not sure whether it was the villainous Otter Head beer or the copious quantities of Shiraz that Iain hurled down my neck at Hilbré, but by the end of a very long evening my belief in the existence of fairies was complete and confirmed. (Iain and Laraine have a colony of tame fairies residing behind a tiny door in the skirting board. I know, I saw them.)

This ride on the 32T is really quite uneventful, so I have time to reflect on the experience so far. I'm still a touch disorientated from last night's Owl Head, and the Shiraz of course. But that'll work itself out once the full English at

Jack's Café (by the bus stop in Teignmouth, for those of you who are new to the area) has hit the spot. Full English, I'm reminded by Iain, is also an important constituent of South West Walking, and I could lose serious points for being led astray to the fresh fruit and yoghurt. Muesli warrants instant dismissal, not to speak of the disapprobation of your fellow South West Walkers.

I'm clad in my Peter Storm jacket, walking trousers and the charity shop boots, which feel a little heavy, but I'm sure they'll prove their worth over the rough terrain to come. Standing in the luggage compartment is my pristine rucksack (just when did they cease to be called "knapsack"?) It's packed with a reasonably realistic assortment of useful articles approximating the weight I shall be carrying for my "A" Levels in March. So there's a bottle of water, Teign river water I think. My pyjamas, with the Superman motif, and several pairs of pants. There are my spare walking socks, the ones I've never worn and shall keep for best, probably. I'm carrying the essential video camera and charger, mobile phone, sudoku puzzle book and my famous Swiss Army knife. And a couple of house bricks and a shoemaker's last for extra ballast. I don't want to enjoy myself too much, you know. Ful-de-ree, Ful-de-rah!

It's fine but overcast this morning, and the bus quickly fills with shoppers. I'm fascinated by the young woman who boarded on the outskirts of Torquay. Shapely form and wonderfully fluid legs. The face is almost simian, however, with dropped lower jaw and protruding chin. Her two kids are the same. They all dog their fags as they board and slide into the seats in front. Iain's quiet. Poring over the metaphorical maps in his mind, I suspect, or maybe nursing a headache from the Shiraz. I'm still a bit spaced out from the excesses of last night, though feeling astonishingly upbeat and excited to be off. I'm not sure what to expect. Iain's done all this before. I am but the sorcerer's apprentice.

It's forty five minutes to Torquay harbour, and I'm already figuring it'll take longer to walk back, particularly over them thar hills. As we alight we are bathed in a gentle drizzle. I pull the hood of the storm jacket over my head and secure it with the cords provided. Then I undo the cords and adjust the

hood because I can't see a bloody thing. Now I look a bit like a fourteen year old train spotter. Iain dons his infinitely more practical leather Crocodile Dundee hat. He's removed the corks, so he looks suitably cool and enigmatic as he hauls the rucksack onto his back with practised ease. Then he helps me clamber into mine.

We're off! Striding out along The Strand, across the roundabout and down Meadfoot Lane, we're heading in the approximate direction of the Coast Path at a rate of knots. Or at least Iain is. I'm proceeding at a sort of rapid plod, already beginning to question the suitability of my footwear. They're good strong boots, I tell myself, and they'll certainly come into their own when we hit the strenuous conditions of the South West Coast Path. Probably. But right now they seem a touch heavy and cumbersome. It's quite an effort to walk in a straight line. And the corners are worse.

Approaching Meadfoot Beach, Iain has stopped to let me catch up.

"You OK Keith? How are the boots?"

"Oh, they're just fine thanks," I pant. "Just getting acclimatised to this pace." Iain knows I'm lying, but he's too much of a gent to push the matter right now.

"Well, we're more or less on the path now. I don't know about you, but I'm not a purist in these matters. I don't feel the need to cover every inch of the Path. We could go out to Thatcher's Point, but it's not in the direction of home, so I thought we could join the Path proper at Anstey's Cove, which is over there. What do you think?"

"Sounds good to me," I puff. Secretly I'm delighted Iain's not a purist. I'm also delighted he seems to have a much better sense of direction than me. I could get lost in a telephone box. To Iain, on the other hand, this coastal walking is simple.

"We just have to keep the sea on our right. That's the sea, the grey green stuff between the path and the sky. So long as it's on our right, we're going in the right direction. And we need to maintain altitude. In case of doubt, the default option is to go up."

"OK," I wheeze. "I'll remember that if I lose sight of you."

But I never do lose sight of Iain. We march and quickly plod, respectively, past Anstey's Cove (we kind of know it's there, without the need to walk right down to the water's edge and back), past Long Quarry Point and along the SWCP to Oddicombe Beach. There's a Cliff Railway here, and a steep hill that leads right down to the beach. But we don't feel the need to reassure ourselves that the beach is still there. We scuttle on past, and into Babbacombe, with its model village.

The drizzle has packed up now and the day has brightened. But the path is muddy and steep in places. I'm not sure I trust the tread on these boots, and I really don't want to fall. Iain seems to spring from step to step like an enchanting young gazelle. My progress is that of a suspicious water buffalo. I begin to feel the tension in my thighs. I find myself engaging Iain in conversation on all kinds of topics, as a ruse to take my mind off the increasing agony of my feet. We cover our life stories, employment histories, our theories of life, death and the known universe. Occasionally I glimpse to my right and spot the ocean, there between the trees.

"That'll be Shag Cliff and Smuggler's Hole," exclaims Iain as we emerge from another forest and cross the road that would take us down to Watcombe beach. I try to muster some enthusiasm, but we're only a couple of miles out, and I'm already longing for journey's end.

At Maidencombe there's a rather attractively olde worlde thatched inn, called, appropriately, The Thatched Inn. We descend from the path in the early afternoon for a brief rest and some light refreshment.

The relief I experience when I haul the rucksack from my back and shed the soiled boots is so palpable it is shared by Iain, the landlord and all customers present. It's only overshadowed by the reminder that I shall have to replace both rucksack and the benighted boots after a short respite. I hurry, as fast as my little and abused legs will carry me, to the lavatory.

"Bloody hell! Watch out for the hand dryer if you go in there. It's blowing at force nine!" I cry as I emerge from the facilities. My bowels have held out remarkably well during the three

hours since Newquay, which is just as well as Iain has only thought to bring with him a few sheets of loo paper “for emergencies”, and my Swiss army knife isn’t fully plumbed in.

The Thatched Inn at Maidencombe boasts a varied menu and a landlord whose sense of humour is a cross between Frankie Howard and Basil Fawlty. I selected the baked jacket with brie and bananas, Iain plumping for baguette á la canard, which I think is a duck roll. I think the beer might be a mistake, but what the hell, I’ve earned one.

We’d like to stay longer in The Thatched Inn, but we’re barely half way home and it’s two o’clock. It’ll be getting dark at five, so we must get a wiggle on. And it’s with real regret that I pull those boots on. There’s a jabbing pain in my left toe, which I suspect is caused by the boot. What’s more both my thighs are almost completely seized. I could do with some serious massage, a large quantity of rum and my bed.

So we hit the road again, bid the affable and informative landlord farewell, and climb out of Maidencombe for the SWCP.

“From here there are some quite stiff gradients until you reach the road at Labrador.....” it says in quite dismissive, understated terms, in the 2001 South West Coast Path Guide. For “some”, read “loads of”, and for “quite stiff” read “bleeding horrendous”. My plod had become a trudge by Maidencombe. Now trudge becomes a sort of desperate scramble as I struggle to mount each of the hundred or more eighteen inch steps that have been helpfully dug into the sixty degree inclines. The routine becomes:-

1. First, using both hands, lift right leg sufficiently high to place it on the next step.
2. Then, taking a deep breath, place your hands on the right knee and haul left leg up onto the same step.
3. Steady yourself and try to stand on both feet in a vertical position.
4. Rest for a couple of minutes until heartbeat returns to 150 and blood pressure no longer ringing in ears.
5. Repeat using left leg.
6. Repeat using alternate legs until the top is reached.

## 7. Give Iain a reassuring thumbs up.

If anything, descent is worse, because it's vital you don't slip in the mud, fall, pick up speed and lose control, or look like you don't know who you are or why.

I continue in this fashion, up hill and down dale, past Blackaller's Cove, Mackerel Cove, Herring Cove and all the way to Labrador Bay. The pain in my toe is excruciating by now, the numbness in my sciatic nerve complete. We're still holding a sort of perfunctory conversation, Iain and I, but it's all I can do to conceal my frustration and my real hatred for these boots. It's like they're welded to my feet.

Iain takes a tumble. I rush to his assistance and reach him in under five minutes. He's largely undamaged, just a dent in his pride and mud on his trousers. When I take my only tumble of the training walk it's quite skilful actually, almost balletic. And the thing is nobody saw it. Except me of course, and only after the event.

We mount the last muddy staircase, climb a stile and are on the Teignmouth Road just above the second Smuggler's Cove of the day.

"Of course, we could get a taxi from here," suggests a still bright and optimistic Iain. Now, I'm suffering quite badly by this time. My feet are both shot, as are my thighs. The knee joints have taken a hammering from those bleeding steps. And my rucksack has been hanging dangerously out of kilter for the last five miles. In short, a taxi sounds rather a pleasant end to this training exercise. So when I hear myself utter

"No, I'd rather finish the thing. I'm a completer/finisher me. What I start, I like to finish."

I'm astonished at my masochistic leanings, my bravado, my utter stupidity. Anyway, we join the path again above Bundle Head and walk down the not so gentle and wet slopes to the Ness, overlooking Teignmouth Bay.

The last mile and a half to Hilbré is on town roads. Along Marine Parade and the Strand in Shaldon I stagger, across the

Teignmouth and Shaldon Bridge. Iain is flagging a little by now. I sense he's more tired than he would admit. But me, I'm walking like a zombie in the night of the living dead. Climbing up Bitton Park Road and Reed Vale, doubled over by the unfeasibly balanced ailing rucksack, I must look like I'm on all fours. Iain has kindly slowed from a tortoise to a snail's pace.

We reach the front door of Hilbré.

“We done the bugger!” exclaims Iain. Now most people think they're the words uttered by Sherpa Tenzing to Ed Hilary on first reaching the summit of Everest in 1953. In point of fact, they were first uttered by Iain Ferguson on the successful completion of the groundbreaking South West Coastal Path training walk 2010. Just so you're clear on that.

I could barely step over the bath rim to get into the shower at Iain's. In fact I was virtually crippled for the next three days. Although the sciatica in both over-tense thighs disappeared fairly quickly with a day or so's relaxation, the pain in the big toe remained. On the morning of the fourth day after the training walk, laying in my pit and listening to Sarah Kennedy's show on Radio 2, she had an item on “My worst pain”. Listeners were invited to report on the most fearful pain they had experienced. One listener reported that the most painful condition he had suffered was gout in the big toe. A light bulb came on in the brain. I had suffered gout once before, about three years previously, and forgotten all about it. My gout had certainly returned to haunt me, probably brought on by the quantities of beer and red wine consumed with Iain in the Ship Tavern and later at Hilbré on the evening before the training walk. So although proper walking boots should feature as a priority in my preparations for the main walk, the boots I had come to hate were not entirely responsible for my woeful toeful.

I still have the boots, and still use them. For digging holes, lopping down trees, mixing concrete. Anything but walking.

### 3. BOOTS MADE FOR WALKING

Lessons had been learned from the training walk, and I pondered over my experiences and feelings over the following days. Two days after my return I hobbled gingerly into Millets in Barnstaple on my gouty toe and still throbbing thighs. The mission : to find some proper walking boots.

“Have you any proper walking boots,” I enquired of the kindly looking manager.

“Why yes indeed,” came the rather obvious reply. “We have a very panoply of same. In all the colours and all the sizes. What size does sir take, pray?”

“Five and a half, but you had better make it a six. I don’t want them to pinch.”

“I’m afraid they start at seven, for a man. Sir has rather a bijou foot, methinks. We have women’s in a six, otherwise you’ll have to try a child’s.”

“I’ll try the ladies’ six if I may. I’m not proud.”

The boots were a perfect fit in a pretty shade of pink. When I stood in them it was almost as if they were lined with fairy dust. Ludicrously comfy and light as a feather, well, as compared to my old friends the working boots that I had slogged over hill and dale in, with a gouty toe and sciatica, for nearly twelve miles. I did a rather impressive tap dance to amuse the crowds, paid for the boots and a bottle of waterproofer, replaced my town shoes (I’m keeping the boots for best of course) and hobbled painfully out of Millets.

So that was the main lesson I had learned from the training walk. Don’t skimp on the boots. They’re rather important you know.

Other gems gleaned from the experience, and from my conversations with Iain en route, included the advisability of carrying a pair of waterproof overtrousers, for protection should the weather prove inclement. A walking stick might give me valuable confidence both up and down the more ferocious slopes. And I should beware of embarking on conversations regarding politics, members of parliament, or the Roman Catholic Church. Or anything else mildly controversial. As Iain says, “it’s all bollocks.”

So by late March I was match fit, well prepared, even packed. Iain and Laraine travelled to Long Lane Farm on the evening before we set off. Logistically, setting off together from Newquay seemed less complicated than each making our way by public transport, and anyway train transport in North Devon is barely an option. We would enjoy another evening of light conviviality before departure. That was the plan at least, and if I did ignore my own remonstrations regarding alcohol consumption before the walk (my gout is almost certainly triggered by occasional excesses), we did have a brilliant evening in their company.

At 8.00 in the morning of 24 March our adventure begins. Iain is driving us to Newquay. Laraine's in the back, as she'll pilot the car from Newquay back to Teignmouth. We want to start walking by 10.00 if possible so that we can be sure of reaching our B.& B. in Porthcothan in daylight. So Iain's not hanging about. No.13, the order spoon from Friendship House in Barnstaple, nestles comfortably in one of the deeper pockets of the Peter Storm jacket. This will be his third adventure with me. He's travelled the United Arab Emirates and Oman, and spent a long and cultural weekend in Krakow. Now we are two men and a spoon, about to walk the South West Coast Path.

A few miles before Porthcothan Iain pulls off of the main road and I navigate him to that gleaming metropolis, with not a little aplomb, I think. We have arranged to drop our rucksacks off at the first B.& B., so that we may do the first day's walk largely unencumbered. Iain's idea, this one, and another good call. We each have a small, disposable, rucksack, which will suffice for the day's privations. His has seen many miles service and is due to retire from active service. Mine's a bargain purchase (97p) "Back to School", bought several years ago, but as yet unused. I've been saving it for best. It's pink, to match the boots.

The Penlan Guest House is a pleasant but unassuming bungalow in a heavily rutted cul-de-sac a mere 400 yards from the path. Mr. Neale meets us at the door. He's fiftyish, tall and powerful, with a startling red beard and long bushy ponytail. A latter day ageing hippy if it weren't for the

fishermen's waders. We can leave our rucksacks in the hall and let ourselves in with the key provided. It seems we have separate self-contained rooms, but Iain's got the ensuite, I've got the library, stereo and tea making equipment. Just before we leave for Newquay, Mr. Neale returns with an internet generated local weather forecast. We may be in for rain later. But we'll take a chance and leave the overtrousers here.

Half an hour later we pull into the Tesco Express car park in the harbour area of Newquay. When this walk was first mooted, Iain and I agreed to meet outside Tesco's or Asda, assuming there'd be one or other somewhere, but as neither of us is acquainted with the area, and both megastores are probably located on out-of-town retail parks, travelling together to Newquay seems to have been another good call. And Tesco Express is just over the road from the start of our walk. We pop into Tesco's for snacks to sustain us during the day's gruelling battle with the elements. Iain chooses a couple of sandwiches and some fruit. I, more health conscious, select a packet of carrot batons, which I'm sure will stave off the hunger pangs in a more eco friendly way.

We don our interim rucksacks, No. 13 takes his position in the pocket of Peter Storm, Iain bids Laraine a fond and emotional farewell, and we're off! Each with a knapsack on his back, Ful-de-ree, Ful-de-rah.

This stretch, from Newquay to Porthcothan, is described by the 2001 Guide as "11.1 miles moderate". It's certainly pleasant walking and none too arduous as we make our way past Tolcarne Beach and the first of many impressive tumuli at the appropriately named Barrowfields. Across sandy Porth Beach we forge and over the narrow stream to Dollar Rock and the fort. The boots are holding well, and since I've dubbed them they don't look quite so shocking pink. We're sticking to the path now, along the cliff at the back of Whipsiderry Beach and further on to the vast Watergate Beach, passing such whimsical titles as Zacry's Islands, Fruitful Cove and Sweden Rock. They all have their history I'm sure, but we're on a mission.

We take turns in the lead, and Iain, with his long, sedate and measured stride, sets the pace. I'm either galloping along to

keep up, or racing ahead to impress Iain with the walking prowess I have acquired on the training walk. I find the stick I'm carrying this time a great help. It was bought for me by my secretary when I retired nearly ten years ago, intending to walk the hills and dales of Great Britain and adopt the lifestyle of the carefree wayfarer. It's been in the shed ever since then. I was keeping it for best.

There's one steepish decline at Tregurrian Hill, and a climb up the other side. But it's not a problem for this seasoned walker. Along the cliff path we stride, to the remains of an iron age fort at Griffin's Point. Then we skirt round Beacon Cove and Berryl's Point, and descend by the coastguard cottages to Mawgan Porth.

"Fancy a cup of tea, Keith,? We're about half way to Porthcothan and I think there's a hotel here."

"Just getting into my stride really. But if you feel the need," I lie.

The Merrymore Inn represents a welcome and refreshing brief semi-colon to the day. A pot of tea for two, with the obligatory moderately tasty biscuits of these regions. I'm glad to rid myself, even temporarily, of the interim rucksack, give No. 13 an airing and rearrange the carrot batons. Iain's scoffed his sandwiches and fruit eons ago. I haven't touched the carrot batons yet. I'll save them for best.

Soon we're off again, skirting along the front of this little settlement of holiday homes and then climbing the stiff gradient to Trenance Point. The walking is more arduous from here, and though the views are spectacular, I have to keep a strict eye on the path ahead. It's up hill, down slope, through mud and mire. But the stunning sight of Bedruthan Steps as the furious Atlantic rollers breaks across them and spews foam high into the sky is one that Iain has longed to experience.

"Look at thaaat!, Cor lummy, bless my soul!" he exclaims in something approaching an Essex accent. What's that all about then?

Pentire Steps is perhaps the steepest climb of the day. And there aren't many steps, really, just a very steep, grassy,

damp and dangerous climb. I'm sweating and puffing my way up it, plunging the stick up to its hilt in the soft mud. Even Iain indulges a sigh, with

**"Bleedin' hell! Who put this thing here?"**

when a tall, lithe athletic type breezes by in lycra shorts, go-faster stripes and a bandanna.

**"Obviously an amateur. He's not even carrying a rucksack."  
"He'll catch his death up here without an overcoat!"**

Then, just seconds later around the next bend, comes Earth Mother. She's early twenties, unfeasibly pretty in satanic gothic weeds, a face beaming with pride and optimism. And she's clutching a bundle to her breast, shielding it from the fierce onshore wind and drizzle. As I struggle towards her (remember, the wind is against me) I am compelled to ask what she has that is so precious at this altitude. She draws near, beams at me again, reveals a tiny pink and hairless baby, nestling between her large, creamy and hairless breasts. I am entranced. I am in love.

The ecstasy of the moment is broken by the return of tall, lithe and athletic, he of the lycra and the stripes. He's got to the top and now he returns to mock us.

There are tumuli up here, lots of them if the map's to be believed. Why on earth the ancients would bury their rich and famous in such inaccessible locations is beyond me. A few steps further and they could have been buried at sea. Tidier, I'd have thought, and much more environmental.

We're skirting round the edge of Porthcothan Bay now, through fields and over stiles as we descend into the little settlement of Porthcothan, past the village stores, which have just closed. Civilisation! Well, of a sort. We pause by the village telephone box, which looks like it might still work. Good news, as getting a signal on the mobile is going to be sporadic.

**"If I remember correctly, we're looking for a driftwood gate, on the right, two properties from the end,"** explains Iain, whose

sense of direction I have come to trust implicitly. The road is dreadfully rutted, and the ruts have become deep puddles. But we're used to poor conditions now, seasoned professionals in pink boots. There's the driftwood gate, and the sign "Penlan". We've completed the first stage.

We removed our muddy boots and let ourselves in, and hurriedly removed our trousers, wet and muddy from the rigours of the day. I put the kettle on, and we were relaxing with tea and biscuits, discussing the events of the day, when Mary Neale appeared through the door that connected to the rest of the house. I think she was genuinely shocked to find two men sitting in their underwear, trousers merrily steaming on the radiators. But we reassured her that we were decent, and not a bit put out by her intrusion. Soon we were striking up quite a rapport with this charming petite landlady. It seems that Mr. Neale is a professional photographer, and that both he and Mary do promotional and PR work in the village and the area. We swapped life stories, exchanged pleasantries, asked where we could get a meal and a few beers, and promised to replace our trousers by the morning. Mary lent us her rechargeable torch, as she explained there is no street lighting in downtown Porthcothan, and dusk was falling. The torch was unpredictable, she warned, but should last for the fifteen minutes or so walk down the hill, if we didn't use it on the way up.

There's just the one pub in Porthcothan, and its name escapes me. It serves an indifferent beef and ale pie and chips, but quite a good pint of Doombar. We had several of the latter, and challenged the locals (there were only two, and not particularly local, Bert and Dave, building gadgies from Liverpool) to darts and pool. They must have spotted our serious talent, or more likely have been aware of our fame in pub game circles, as they turned us down. Instead we played each other. Iain won all three games of darts, perhaps because he is taller than I. Occasionally his darts would hit the board, something I rarely achieved. I won the pool, however, mainly because Iain potted the black ball on a foul shot and followed it down with the cue ball.

Sometime during the evening I tried the mobile. I had promised to keep in touch and update the much beloved on

progress. Allegedly, the only place in Porthcothan where you can get a signal is at the top of the last lamp post on the left of the pub car park. Well, I tried, but shinnying up the lamp post after dark in a drizzle wasn't easy, and I think Gilly would have appreciated my reluctance to sustain serious injury this far into the trip.

So it would have to be the village phone box on the way home. Now, when we'd showered and changed to come out this evening, I'd swapped the pink boots for some sexy open toed sling back crocs. These were the "light shoes for evening wear" I'd selected to tote with me in the rucksack. And they weren't my new crocs, which I'm saving for best. They were several years old, yellow paint spattered from when I painted the kitchen, and the right one has been repaired with a nut and bolt because the rubber strap rivet parted company within weeks of buying them. This is quite a good arrangement and works well if I remember to tighten the bolt from time to time. Iain has also selected crocs for evening wear, but his proved to be of the more practical closed toe variety in a fetching shade of purple.

We left the pub with no name at 9.30. and dived into the damp inky blackness of Porthcothan with no street lights and no moon. The darkness was only broken by Mary Neale's suspect torch and the tiny beacon of light in the far distance which was the telephone box. The rain was unremitting. We more or less tobogganed out of control in our crocs down the hill and made it to the safety of the phone box, Porthcothan's only source of light and life after closing time. Iain struck out for the Penlan Guest House in the intense dark, leaving me with the torch and twenty minutes in the company of the much beloved.

When I finally left the call box for the warmth of my bed, Mary Neale's suspect torch died, and the last couple of hundred yards were like negotiating the lake district in a fog, blindfolded. Somewhere in that wet inky blackness I lost my nut. The one in my croc I mean. It pinged off somewhere between the phone box and the driftwood gate.

#### 4. IN SEARCH OF QUATTIES

I had slept very badly on my first night away from home. It is, I think, a combination of alcohol, excitement, different air and a bad conscience that averagely keeps me awake long into the early hours. Added to which there was the anxiety over the lost nut in my croc, and the early but unmistakeable signs of stress in the seams of the rucksack. I had tossed and turned most of the night away, with intermittent attempts to find something to my taste in the extensive library of Mr. and Mrs. Neale, which were my quarters. So I vacillated between half-sleep and forays into *Swallows and Amazons For Ever*, *A Photographic History of Porthcothan*, and *The Screwfix Catalogue*. I was beginning to wish I had brought with me the trusty Walkman and collection of Tony Hancock tapes, when dawn crept over the window sill, Iain's gentle rhythmic breathing broke into a snort, and I figured the time was ripe and respectable to put the kettle on for tea and Bach's Brandenburg Concerti, 4, 5 and 6 on the squeeze box. Thought it would help with the digestion.

"Cup of tea, Iain, and a moderately tasty biscuit?"

"That would be most civilised, thank you. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes thanks," I replied, thinking it's no point regaling him with Arthur Ransome or the finer points of masonry drill bits.

We'd already slipped into a routine of easy domesticity. And by the time Mary Neale knocked tentatively on the intervening door, we were shaved, showered, powdered and appropriately trousered to receive her.

Mary busied about like a bright little humming bird, served us cereal followed by the obligatory generous full English, toast and marmalade and a vast and steaming cauldron of English Breakfast Tea. And she did it with a speed, enthusiasm and grace that belied her other professional pursuits. I mentioned the loss of my croc nut, and she reassured me that she would scour the countryside in an exhaustive search just as soon as we departed. If she found it, she would despatch it by courier to our next port of call.

**We repacked the rucksacks. From here on we would be carrying the full monty, and the interim rucksacks could be disposed of. Iain, without a touch of emotion for the aged companion of his youth, deposited his in the waste bin at the Penlan Guest House. I decided to keep my later model for best, and I folded it neatly, wrapped it around the carrot batons, and stashed it in the main rucksack.**

**We were in the front garden, helping each other mount rucksacks high on to our respective backs, when Mr. Neale's imposing figure and ponytail hove into view. He gave us a fresh computer generated weather forecast for the hours ahead. Rain was due in the late afternoon. We would keep the overtrousers handy.**

**I had refolded the map, for the first time, to show the route of today's march. This became part of my routine for the next few days, apprentice map-folder. Today's goal was Padstow, and the going was said to be an "easy" 7.9 miles to Trevone, followed by a further "easy" 5.7 to Padstow Harbour. So I, for one, set off with a spring in my step and a stick in my hand and only a slight concern for the lost nut in my head.**

**"What does it look like anyway, Keith, this nut of yours?"  
"Well, its got sort of six sides, with a hole in the middle and a screw thread, made of metal, and it looks like a nut really."  
"We'll retrace our footsteps to the telephone box. If we don't find it, we'll look for a replacement in Padstow. I expect there'll be an engineering establishment in the vicinity."**

**We don't find the nut. But we quickly find the path again and we're climbing out of Porthcothan Bay at a good pace. My thighs kind of remind me that they worked hard for six and a half hours yesterday, but they're not complaining, and soon get into a stride of their own.**

**This part of the coastline is unusually indented, but the path cuts across the narrower headlands. Minnows Islands are spectacular for their intricate beauty, and the way they chop the water into a myriad of sparkling rivulets. It is reassuring to be informed by the map that these "islands" come under the administrative control of North Cornwall District Council.**

But I see no evidence of a planning officer, much less a dustcart.

At Fox Cove a ship ran aground in 1969. We see no signs of the remains, perhaps it's high tide. But we do spot the remains of the iron age fort between Warren Cove and Pepper Cove, just beyond. Then we descend over the rocks into little Treyarnon Bay, and cross the beach and ford the stream to climb the other side. Next come the dunes of Constantine Bay and we're cutting across at a fair yomp to the rocks at the end where we scramble nimbly through the pools to adjoining Booby's Bay.

"Can you spot any spare boobies lain?"

"They all look spoken for, I'm afraid."

So we forge on, and I'm really getting into my stride now. I recently acquired a Wii, and a Wii Fit, and have been using them to become the super fit little dynamo that you see in the pictures before you. Now the Wii is an incredibly intelligent machine, and it's advised me that my centre of balance is off kilter, that I've a tendency to lean to the left and to the back. In short, I have a list to port and my ballast is stowed aft. And I've been trying to correct this because it may have a not insignificant effect on my gait, my posture and my ultimate chances of success in long distance walking. The Wii also gives personal advice to its users. One piece of advice it has recently imparted is that I should concentrate on using the whole of my feet, heel, ball and both big and little toes, when walking. I've watched lain from the rear, and this is what he does, though no doubt it's unconscious in his case. My tendency has for ever been to mince along on tip toe, performing occasional spectacularly balletic tumbles and spins as I progress through the obstacle course of my life. Well, right here, on the South West Coast Path, climbing steadily up to Trevoze Head Lighthouse, I try the advice of the Wii. Evening out the balance between left and right, leaning slightly forward to counterbalance centre of gravity, and concentrating on using the whole of each foot, I march doggedly ahead. And it seems to work. So long as I concentrate on the business of walking, I can actually do it quite well.

There's a fearsome collapsed cave at Trevoise Head, called, rather descriptively, Round Hole. We stop for a few photos, but the hole seems to draw you in, and neither of us has the nerve to draw too close. The immaculate stark white lighthouse, however, with its backdrop of Atlantic rollers crashing ferociously onto sloe black rocks, more than makes up for our reluctance with the black hole.

"For the minutes, it was called the Tredrea Inn," says Iain, a non-sequitur I wasn't expecting through the banana he's chewing.

"What, your banana? Do Tesco's name them then?"

"No, the pub we were at last night. You know, Bert and Dave, the pool and darts, Doombur beer. Beef and Ale pie."

"Oh yes, the Doombur. And the phone box. It's all coming back. The Beef and Ale pie was a bit of a disappointment, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, with the removeable puff pastry lid. Not exactly cordon bleu was it? Not worth a mention in dispatches, that one."

It's just a viewing break, perched on one of the many seats placed along this path, dedicated to "Bert and Doris.....who really loved this place", "Fred and Eric.....who were also fond of it", and "Tom and Annie.....who weren't too fussed actually". We're soon off again, along the cliff edge, past the lifeboat station and the sewage outlet at Mother Ivey's Bay and Cottage and out to Cataclews Point, jutting threateningly out into the Atlantic above Harlyn Bay.

At beautiful sandy Harlyn Bay there are surfers. The water must be bloody freezing, but the stalwarts are here, gently bobbing up and down in the two foot waves. We skirt the beach, heading east now and with the breeze behind us, as planned by Iain. Across the little wooden Harlyn Bridge and up to St. Cadoc's Point.

"Did you see the seals?" The cry is excited, imperious, ecstatic. A family of four, the children bright, cheerful and alive, engages us with their infectious enthusiasm.

"There are seals, a whole colony of them. Look, down there on the rocks."

And sure enough, there's Sammy, and about forty other basking seals, playfully lounging on the rocks below in Newtrain Bay. We take a few photos, thank the family for pointing them out for we should never have spotted them unaided, and carry on along the cliff path to Trevone, where, the Guide has it, there are toilets, a café and a good beach "but little else of interest to the walker."

The Guide's right about Trevone. Even the café's not of much interest to the walker, serving as it does the most expensive cup of indifferent tea in the world. But it is an opportunity to ditch the rucksacks for the first time today. I have to admit that's a welcome relief. In fact, I'm beginning to wonder if I can make it all the way to Padstow. The boots are doing fine, but the rucksack weighs heavy. Perhaps I should jettison the carrot batons? Some of my used underwear? The sudoku puzzle book I've been keeping for best? It goes against the grain really. Anyway, we can almost see Padstow from here, on a clear day. We're already in the County Parish. This is the way my confused and tired brain is reasoning with itself as I help Iain on with his superior rucksack, don my own, reluctantly retrieve No.13 from the puddle he's playing in with walking stick, and we resume our way.

The rest at Trevone was but scant respite. The climb from the car park to Roundhole Point is approaching the vicious, and we make an excuse of the impressive Round Hole collapsed cave ("approach with caution") for another brief breather and photo shoot. A chilling breeze from offshore bites the ears just here, but the walking has become easier again, and the limestone and shale cliffs are alive with exotic birds. Beyond Porthmissen Bridge we skirt around a disused quarry and an even less used mine, past Middle Merope Island to Gunver Head. And this is where I get right back into my stride.

"You're thinking about your walking again," calls a plaintive Iain from way behind me, "I'll see you at the top."

But I slow down a gear or two, to let the old timer catch up. This long stretch is easy peasy, methinks, all I have to do is keep the sea on my left, and my eye on the puddles. We motor along the cliff path to Butter Hole Cove, which brings

us up with a start. Another collapsed cave system, as dramatic and foreboding as it is somehow lost and beautiful.

“This is a disused coastguard lookout,” explains Iain, as he leans against Daymark Tower on Stepper Point and tries to look knowledgeable and worldly wise. “Over there is Padstow, and in the far distance you can see Bodmin Moor on a clear day.”

“What happens on a dull day?”

“Well, you can’t see it. But it’s still there. Probably.”

“And what about the disused quatties?” I ask, in all innocence.

“What’s them, then?”

“On the map it says there are some disused quatties, right here. Right where we stand.”

“Well then there must be then. For the Ordnance Survey never get it wrong. I expect the quatties are right under foot.”

Iain is wearing the map around his neck, but from this angle, without his specs and in a following wind, he can’t read it. In fact he can’t read a thing. So I become the map reader and interpreter. Iain’s chest is a handy navigation plinth, which I study at length with the eye glass attached to my Swiss Army Knife if there is any doubt at all about our future progress. This may look a bit strange mid-path, but I’m sure the few passing locals will understand.

“But what is a Quatty, when it’s at home?”

“I have no idea. My otherwise encyclopaedic knowledge does not, apparently, stretch thus far. But we shall enquire at the local hostelry, you can be sure.”

We never do discover the provenance or the meaning of the quatties. But if they do indeed exist on the North Cornish Coast, then we two have seen them.

It’s all downhill from here, along the cliff path gently descending, past the coastguard station at Hawker’s Cove, across a couple of streams and the dunes at Harbour Cove then levelling out around Gun Point, from which the infamous sounding Doombar may be seen. We’ve been drinking Doombar since entering the state of Cornwall, and now we witness the derivation of this tasty brew. It’s a sand bar in the

mouth of the Camel which effectively blocks off Padstow Bay to significant sea traffic. Going by its name, it's had a violent past.

Finally descending towards Padstow we lose the path momentarily in a field of sheep, and I swear it's only my rapport with these kindly but stupid animals that wins the day. I speak sheepish, you see, and am able to both converse with them and plot direction by their demeanour or faecal expression. We have soon rediscovered the path, lacerate ourselves through a particularly unrelenting hawthorn hedge, and are descending by the war memorial towards Padstow Harbour.

Padstow, or Padstein, as it's fast becoming known since a certain fishy gastronome's taken an interest and stamped his mark on most of the eateries in the village, is every bit as quaint and twee as it was in the days of my childhood. But whence the Rock café of my tender years, where for a few pence I could indulge my sugar lust on genuine olde worlde pebble shaped rock? Rock has become Rick, it appears. Here is Rick's Café (american?), there Rick's Bistro. Rick's Posh Restaurant is in the next street, and Rick's Pie and Mash Shoppe rubs shoulders with Rick's Chippy and Rick's Trattoria.

With tomorrow's start in mind, we by-passed all this flummery and made straight for the Tourist Information Bureau on the harbour, in search of information on the Rock (Rick?) Ferry. With confirmation that it operates every 30 minutes or so, dependent on the tide and the mood of the captain, and that we might catch it from this very spot on the morrow, we made for the hotspots of downtown Padstow, that is to say we sought out a purveyor of postcards.

Now Padstow retains some of its quaint characters and characteristics in its commercial quarter, and you certainly know you're in a strange and foreign land when you buy a postcard. The custom it is in these parts to pay for your purchases in the premises immediately adjacent, or nearby.

**“I’ll take these three saucy ones, stout woman, if you please,” I suggest, proffering payment for three postcards showing views of Padstow Harbour and environs completely naked.**

**“Thank you my lover,” comes the lusty reply, “but you must pay next door, in the fudge shop.”**

**“Very well, good woman. And, prithee, could you kindly direct me to Grenville Road, and the whereabouts of Gilly Constance, our landlady for the night.”**

**“You best axe my friend, for she’s Padstonian. I’m not from these parts.”**

**Her friend did give me some rather confusing directions to Grenville Road, and soon we were nicely lost in the descending gloom and drizzle of Padstow on a darkling Thursday in late March. We trudged tiredly up a one in four out of town, across a dual carriageway, through one of those underpasses that you have to emerge from every half an hour or so like a mole, just to check on progress, across several roundabouts and a contraflow. Just beyond the industrial estate and the multiplex cinema, Iain spotted the landmark we’d been looking for ever since leaving Padstow as but a long distant memory in the past behind us.**

**“Tesco’s! We turn right here, and first right again into Grenville Road.” Dead right, too. Why I ever asked the grinning Padstonian, rather than rely on Iain and his trusty satellite maps, I’ll never know. In a few minutes we dripped into the hallway of the Roselyn Guest House in Grenville Road, and the kindly Gilly Constance helped us dismount.**

**The Roselyn Guest House was a well appointed four star establishment in a quiet leafy suburban road. I broke out the Earl Grey and bikkies and nursed the aching feet as Iain showered and abluted. Then, duly refreshed, and balancing on one nutless croc, we considered our options. Frankly, neither of us fancied the tortuous trip back down the hill to Padstow, in a relentless drizzle. But neither did we fancy an evening before the telly subsisting on the remaining two chocolate bourbons and a shared mug of cocoa. Domestically blissful though it sounds now, in retrospect.**

**Our cogitations were brought to an abrupt end by the ever helpful Gilly Constance, who rushed to our aid with her secret**

hand-drawn map showing the back passage to Padstow Harbour (“past the public conveniences and through the car park”). No more than 10 minutes this way, she assured us.

We set off with renewed enthusiasm and a hankering for some of that Doombur at the London Inn. I clutched Gilly’s map in my soggy hand, clenched my toes to grip the failing, nutless right croc, and with an enthusiasm belied by the rigours of the day, we burst forth upon the unsuspecting Padstow evening.

The light was failing fast by this time, and the map began to disintegrate. Past the public conveniences we scuttled (looking as non furtive as possible) and through the car park. I glimpsed at the map for inspiration, but the drizzle had made short work of it, and it dissolved before my eyes.

A hulking figure in wet yellow coveralls and gum boots lumbered heavily towards us through the gloom, the glow from the single street lamp bouncing weird shapes and ghostly shadows off the balding pate, the warty nose, the underarm pickaxe.

“Excuse me, sir, but can you please direct us to the London Inn? Please.” I stammer nervously.”

“Mnnurgh. Mnnnurrghh. Downn mnnurggrhh.”

“Thanks, awfully. That’s a great help.”

“It’s OK, Keith, I think I have the way. It’s down here. We just have to keep losing height.” I should’ve known Iain would find the way. I know he hates asking directions, particularly when he’s got a perfectly adequate map.

The London Inn. A good drop of Doombur, and so of course it should be, this close to home. We dined superbly on Chicken Madras, with naans and all the usual chutneys. Spectacularly good from a white Caucasian fourteen year old chef. And this was followed by a shared cheese board as ample as it was eclectic. And several more pints of Doombur. An hour or so into the evening the vast yellow-clad and gumbooted one manoeuvred itself through the narrow front bar of the London Inn, leant the pickaxe against the bar and ordered a couple of pints of Doombur. As a gesture of thanks and goodwill I paid

for them. She was a perfectly pleasant woman, after all, and a bit of a character about the Padstow pub scene, probably.

Towards closing time the beer and the fatigue of the day took its toll. Neither of us, we few, we very few stalwarts of the South West Coast Path, could face the steep climb back up the hill to the Roselyn Guest House. And without Gilly Constance's dissolving map, I'm not sure we'd have made it anyway, despite Iain's superior form of intuitive dead reckoning. So we plumped for a taxi. Rather a large one it turns out.

Waiting in the front bar for the taxi to arrive, I was engaged in conversation by the landlady of the London Inn. A well-upholstered sixty something, she boasted a large and comfortable bosom and a camper van in which, she claimed, she sullies forth into the wilds of Cornwall, Devon and Dorset. Sometimes she travels further abroad and has ventured into Scotland. Visions of Spain, Greece and the orient floated before me. Or barrelling down Route 66 with the wind blowing through my hair (not so romantic in a camper van I dare say).

"You've pulled, Keith." Iain has been watching from the aisle. "She fancies you. If you play your cards right, you could be smuggling up in that camper van tonight! Or in the large and comfortable bosom."

Suddenly I'm sober. The Doombur mists have subsided. The taxi's here. I'm off to my bed.

## 5. THE CROW'S NEST

As the days of walking wore on I slept more soundly at night. But as the sleep became deeper, so the dreams became ever more dramatic and surreal, as the unconscious mind tried to make sense of the bizarre goings on around me.

After the hasty and strategic withdrawal from the clutches of the London Inn's rapacious landlady, we paid the cab driver off and I scuttled indoors to the safety of my bed and its still virginal sheets. Iain had a mild contretemps with the ultra sensitive smoke alarm, triggered as it was into premature action by his attempt to make lapsang suchong and finish the remaining chocolate bourbons. A frantic midnight scout around our room revealed the alarm, perched on high and cunningly disguised atop a light fitting.

Now, I've had a deal of experience with errant smoke alarms, both at home and away. In Holsworthy at the wood carving course, I'd had to perform instant and terminal surgery on an alarm that insisted shrieking its message of unfeasible decibels to warn the entire locality, and his wife, and her husband, that Pugsley had committed the capital offence of midnight toast. So here in Padstow the protocol for dealing with these annoying little blighters was well known to me. I swiftly removed the offending article, using the monkey wrench attachment on my Swiss Army Knife, and secreted it deep in a sock drawer in an unused bedroom some miles away. It lies there, neglected and unwanted, to this day. Probably.

So last night's colourful pageant of dreams included one of me, sold into white slavery and travelling the world as the unwilling captive aboard a vast and boundless camper van, sort of a Ghormenghast on wheels, where I was abused and horribly humiliated by a large, comfortably bosomed but warty Miss Whiplash in fishnets and yellow reflective jacket. Every now and again a door would open and I would be mocked in my agony, by a nutless croc, a bursting rucksack, a chortling No.13. The plaintiff cries of the gagged smoke alarm haunt me even now.

"Have you written your postcards, Keith?"

Iain brought me back to a welcome reality.

“Yes, thanks. I wrote them in the early hours, during a moment of sleeplessness. So has No.13. He’s sent one to the other spoons in the utensil jar on the counter at Friendship House.”

“Has he any special relationships, do you know, with the other spoons?”

“Well, I think he’s rather fond of No. 22. But I’m not sure he’s clear on his own sexuality. No. 22 is a strapping great ladel.”

“I’m sure he’ll find himself while he’s away. Absence makes the spoon grow fonder, you know!”

Breakfast at Roselyn was of course four star. We started with a sort of do-it-yourself muesli, a self select and construct medley of every kind of dried fruit, nut, seed, kernel and cereal flake known to mankind. Followed by the ubiquitous full English (though Iain and I passed on the fried slice, again), toast, marmalade, and lashings of coffee and tea. Eventually we hauled ourselves up from the breakfast table after a repast fit for a king, burped in unison and readied ourselves for the road.

I’d noticed by now that even a sustaining night’s rest was not quite sufficient to effect complete repairs to my tortured frame. Each morning, I would start slightly more tired than the morning before, so that wear and tear appears to be cumulative in my case. But once the boots were laced and the rucksack mounted, the initial pain dissipated in the first quarter of an hour or so. Today’s stint starts with Padstow to Rock on the ferry, not officially graded in the 2001 Guide, but I’d call it “about half a mile, piece of piss”. Then it’s Rock to Polzeath, “2.9 miles easy”. Followed by “8.8 miles strenuous” to Port Isaac.

It’s a beautifully clear bright day as we strike out from the Roselyn Guest House. We slip easily down Gilly Constance’s secret back passage in silence, savouring the morning. We’re outside Rick’s Chinese Takeaway in no time and make for the harbour in the sunshine.

The Rock Ferry’s quite an informal affair. We watch it scud across the Camel estuary at low tide, weaving a path between the sand bars. It pulls up to the concrete launch ramp and we

just walk on. We're sharing the ferry with a family of four taking the dog for a walk on the beach in Rock. And the captain of course. It's £1.50 each, which is rather good value as it saves a tedious inland hike of several miles right up the valley to the source of the Camel.

The water's calm as a mill pond as we push off, but grey clouds glower above, and the light breeze has quickened into a stiff wind. Mid stream there's a gentle spattering of rain on deck. Can we be in for stormy weather? The captain has set his grizzled jaw. The dog's cowering in the bilge. The mood of the crew is angry.

"Batten down the hatches! Splice the mains'!! Avast there me hearties, every man for himself!" At least that's what I expected him to say.

"Tickets please," is what he actually says. It's a little bizarre. He only issued these tickets three minutes ago. Now he wants to punch them.

We disembark on the beach in three inches of water and a monsoon. It's time to break out the overtrousers. Mine are wrapped around the carrot batons. Iain's better prepared, and his are ready to hand in a side pouch. But by the time we've found them the rain's abated. Now the sun appears again, and we stash the overtrousers back where they belong. Iain agrees with me, we'll save them for best.

Soon we're yomping gleefully along Daymer Bay, a mile of sandy dunes and tussocky grass. I came here as a boy with my parents and sister. We would make sandcastles and bake in the sun. I can still see some of the sandcastles. They've lasted well. Later, in my twenties, I came here again with Gilly, just to gambol in the sand, body surf in the breakers and generally roast the day away. I caught sunstroke here. And I'm telling Iain all about it, waxing lyrical about my idyllic youth on the sands of Daymer Bay, when my feet, both of them, simultaneously, are sliced from under me....

"Oomph! ....sandcastles." I conclude. It was Iain, not I, who noticed I finished my sentence there, lying face down in the

sand, my nose millimetres from away from a large, fresh and rather juicy dog turd.

“Are you OK Keith?” Iain rushes to my assistance.

“Nothing broken, I don’t think. But it’s bloody sore. What did I hit?”

“It looks like a submerged strand of fence wire. The sand’s drifted against the fence and you tripped on the top strand it seems,” Iain helpfully, and I think sympathetically, explains.

I’m going to need to be careful. My feet won’t survive many conversations like that. So, I’m trying to concentrate more on the walking than on the talking. And despite my fall, we’re making good progress around the tumulus at Brea Hill, from which the infamous Doom Bar is clearly visible. On to the rocky outcrop of Trebetherick Point.

“I met Sir John Betjemen here. About forty five years ago. He lived here in Trebetherick and I was on my holidays in Polzeath. Came across him in his back garden. Of course he wasn’t “Sir” then, just good old Johnny. He was Poet Laureate at the time and I was studying his work for “O” Level. Grumpy old sod. Wouldn’t autograph my exercise book.”

“I should concentrate on the walking here, Keith. It’s starting to get a bit tasty again.

At Polzeath the surfers are out in force, hurtling headlong into Hayle Bay on the backs of high Atlantic rollers. We drop down and cross the rocks to walk the front, past the hotel and up the first significant climb of the day, to the massive and dramatic Pentire Point.

The pain in my feet, particularly the right foot, is beginning to trouble me. But I daren’t investigate too far, for fear of what I’ll find. Rolling down my right sock I reveal an angry red weal tracing the curve of the foot. There’s no blood, thank God, and I think I’ve got away with severe bruising.

The gradient’s getting to me now. Bent almost double, hauling myself and my rucksack laboriously up this blessed incline, the blood’s rushing to my head. Grunting and

groaning with the effort. The stick's got a mind of its own in these muddy ruts. The rucksack's listing alarmingly to starboard.

“Do you mind if I just slip through?” she purrs lustily in my left ear. I didn't hear her coming. A vision of loveliness, a Venus in black. I lurch heavily to the right, and she wafts through, silent as a gentle zephyr. And she's one of a pair. With two American boyfriends. The innocence and enthusiasm of youth, they prance from rock to rock, leap from step to step, as they hurry effortlessly up to the top of Pentire Point.

Iain and I finally catch them up at The Rumps, where they've stopped to flirt a bit and generally rumpy pumpy about. The views from up here are truly amazing. To the south there's Trevoze Head, where we stopped yesterday.

“That's got to be Lundy Island,” Iain points at a low dark hump in the misty middle distance out to sea. “And in the far distance is Bude, journey's end. And Hartland Quay, through my imaginary binoculars.”

From The Rumps we're moving eastwards again, as we will be all the way to Bude. The path clings tightly to the precipitous cliffs all around Port Quin Bay and it seems to be a never ending succession of disused quarries, tips and ragged staircases all the way. Carnweather Point is particularly dicey, and fortunate we are that the wind is blowing onshore at this spot. An offshore wind would surely take us with it over an almost sheer drop to the craggy rocks below. There's no sign of civilisation and absolutely no facilities for the casual walker between Polzeath and Port Quin, which only boasts a car park. Thus far I've been grateful for the graceful conduct of my bowels, which seem to have an inbuilt anathema to public defecation. On this particular stretch I'm grateful too for a strong heart, a stable constitution and a doughty travelling companion.

After the tortuous descent into Lundy Hole, we both need a rest.

**“Fancy a carrot baton, Iain? I’ve been keeping them for a moment such as this.”**

**“Not for best, then? Well I don’t think we’re going to find a cup of tea right here. But perhaps we should take a break. I’ll stick to my banana though. Fancy an apple?”**

**So we take five right in the middle of the path at Lundy Hole. By a babbling brook, in a shady nook. I could almost wax lyrical, but I’m too shagged out. Then it’s not so swiftly onwards, down dale and up hill, tiny Epphaven Cove, followed by Pigeon Cove and Gilson’s Cove. At Doyden Point wild ponies cling to the impossible cliffs. One takes a fancy to me and gallops up to enquire as to my wellbeing.**

**At Port Quin car park we hold a summit meeting. Iain senses that my right foot is giving me, shall we say, cause for concern. In fact it’s bloody agonising, like it’s been hacked about with a blunt knife. Not the gout this time, nor the sciatica. I’m even wearing appropriate boots. It’s just that bit of wire in Daymer Bay that has cast a shadow over my progress today.**

**“It’s about three miles to Port Isaac along the coast path,” Iain’s in the Chair. “There’s another, less well known, but more direct path from here. It goes inland a bit, and it won’t be so picturesque, but it’s only two miles to Port Isaac. What do you think?”**

**He needn’t ask really, but ever the gent, Iain’s also a famous democrat.**

**So it’s democratically decided we take the inland route to Port Isaac. According to the map, we only have to cross six or seven fields. They’re big fields mind. And they’re muddy fields too. And most importantly, they’re fields populated with large and curious cattle. None of this is clear from the map, of course, except for the size of the fields, which look deceptively small.**

**We climb the steep hill out of Port Quin and again, Iain’s navigation is legendary. Soon we’re wading through what would pass for the battlefields of Flanders, except for the lack of barbed wire, dead soldiers and horses. And bullets of course. The fields are rippled with layers of dense treachery**

chocolate mud, richly infused with cow dung and the other detritus of rural life.

“Oh this is great,” cries a dismayed Iain. “Cows, at least I think they’re cows. Your department I think Keith.”  
“I think you’ll find they’re a load of bullocks, actually. A mixture of the sexes. Young, and quite harmless, in theory. Just a bit curious. At worst a little friendly. We’ve just got to hope there’s not a bull with them. Shouldn’t be a problem. It’s against the law to keep a bull of unfriendly breed or demeanour in a field through which a public path crosses, you know. Or something.” I just knew my knowledge of the law and of animal behaviour would come in handy somewhere in our travels.

“Yes, but does the farmer know that?”

There’s about forty head of cattle each side of a narrow opening in a dry stone wall through which the path passes. The trick is not to get stranded between the two groups, but I don’t think the bullocks appreciate that. Anyway, it’s more by luck than judgement that we negotiate the gap unscathed, and make off into the quagmire beyond.

After what seems like an age, we descend from this desolate muddy plateau in the wilds of St. Endellion County Parish and cross a tiny hidden foot bridge. We have only one more steep climb and then it’s over the hill to drop down, past Doc Martin’s televisual cottage, into Port Isaac’s tiny beach (which doubles as its only car park at low tide). We are so beshitted with mire, cow dung and other indescribable filth by the time we reach The Haven (Port Isaac’s name for its beachy car park), that we wade straight into the icy cold briney. Armed with scrubbing brushes hastily fashioned out of sea weed, we remove what we can of the evidence of our battle with the blood and the mud and the bullocks.

The staff and patrons of The Crow’s Nest were a motley crew, but they welcomed the battle-scarred duo like conquering heroes. We were carried aloft to the cheers of a multitude of admiring spectators, bestrewn with garlands of exotic flowers, showered with kisses by hoards of grass-skirted lovelies. Whilst there was no evidence of a brass band, I suppose it was early in the season. And my fetid imagination

runs wild again. In fact there was some confusion about the booking I had made with Mr. Cunningham, the kindly but bumbling captain of the Crow's Nest.

"There's only one of you, isn't there?"

"No captain, surely you can spot that we are, in fact, in the plural. We are a duality. There is indeed more than the one of us. To wit, there are two."

"Well, it's a tiny room, and there's only one single bed."

"Such will suffice, for as you can see, one of us is tiny too."

"Well, I suppose I could squeeze another bed in, but it'll be cosy."

"Pray do." I daren't mention No. 13, because he didn't feature in the equation when I made the original booking. Besides, he'll only need an inch or two, and he can share with me.

So for the next several hours we sat beside the huge picture window in the bar of the Crow's Nest, quaffing pints of Doombar and gazing out over Port Isaac Bay as the fog settled like a shroud over the darkling day.

"I'm glad I'm in here and not walking the path at this time of the evening, in that mist," commented Iain.

"And that mud," I added.

"Do you see, in the far distance, that church-shaped object? Well that's tomorrow's target. I'm pretty sure that's Tintagel Church."

I'm surprised, as the church looks so far away, and yet so near. If it was indeed Tintagel Church, it must be of immense, cathedral type proportions. And I hadn't heard of Tintagel Cathedral.

As the evening wore on and the beer and red wine took a hold, we turned our attentions to the interior of the Crow's Nest and its motley crew. Captain Cunningham, a large, booming individual, tried, albeit nervously, to play the part of mine host, but was clearly missing the female support and companionship his late wife had provided. His jokey predictability could have become irritating, but his desire to please endeared him to us.

Dougie propped up the bar from the other side. Short, grey-balding and sixtyish, he cut a dapper dash in cavalry twills and blue shirt and tie. First mate, I'd have said, but up to most tasks. It was he who helped the captain with the furniture removals we'd occasioned by our "surprise" arrival.

Donna made up the ship's compliment of bar staff. Brash and bosomy, with an easy laugh and a friendly smile, she kept the beers coming, so she must have been the Quartermaster. Her sister, Port Isaac's Lolita, sweet sixteen and dressed in black, sat demure and cross legged on a high bar stool playing provocatively with a bag of gobstoppers.

In the galley worked Tom, who I'm sure was either a pirate or a stowaway. Slight, moustachio'd, with gold earring and an accent I couldn't place but it was certainly rural rather than maritime. A poor man's Johnny Depp, perhaps. He knocked us up a couple of sirloin steaks. And between times he would attend to the log burner.

Thus we spent an evening of the most pleasant conviviality and idle banter with the crew of the Crow's Nest. By closing time we two were the only remaining guests, and we took to our liliputian quarters high in the rigging. Our room was indeed minuscule, with an ensuite cut out of one corner. Iain had the window giving onto the dustbins, and the tea making facilities. My bed was at rightangles to his, so that our toes could keep each other company in those desperate early hours.

No.13 shared with me, which would have been all right, but he had struck up a passing acquaintance with the local No.17, and insisted she stay too.

It was going to be another stirring night.

## 6. THE TINTAGEL HARDWARE EMPORIUM

**“Good morning, Keith. Though it’s a bit of a dreary one. I think the weather’s finally caught up with us. Fancy a cup of tea?”**

**I couldn’t actually see Iain as he assumed the role of char wallah in our bijou domain high in the rigging. Though the room was tiny, he was sort of around the corner formed by the ensuite, with his head under the only window, nestled amidst the tea pot, kettle and an array of garish mugs sporting the colours and logos of the entire Scottish Premier League. So when his disembodied voice, laced with the tinkling of china and a plume of steam, snaked its way around the corner, it was with surprise and delight that I took up his kind offer of early refreshment.**

**“Yes please. And I’ll take a couple of muffins and a soupcon of kedgeree from the sideboard.”**

**“Fraid I can only stretch to English Breakfast Tea at this point. Hey, did you spot the hikers who arrived last night? They’d come from Tintagel.”**

**“Yeah. Desperate looking trio weren’t they? Can’t say I’d relish walking the path after dark this time of year.”**

**“Exactly, and particularly in a mist, and drizzle. Apparently this next bit is reckoned to be the most strenuous and difficult of the entire 640 miles.”**

**It’s fair to say our mood was a touch gloomy as we sat at the breakfast table. In fact it was precisely the same table we had occupied for the previous evening of conviviality and people watching. But in the very cold and not so clear half light this morning the task ahead was daunting. To me, at least. Iain was his usual calm and enigmatic self, as he stiffened the upper lip to taste the smoked salmon and scrambled eggs Captain Cunningham placed busily before him. I had really got into the full English by now, and the platter the First Mate presented me with was very nearly the size of England. I resolved right then and there that I must overcome this recently acquired penchant for death dealing mountains of cholesterol, and left the four fried slices, two of the three sausages, half the mountain of beans and some of the eggs.**

We chatted in a lighter vein to last night's late arrivals at a nearby table. A father and middle aged son, with the son's friend, a Falklands vet, they were clearly seasoned professionals at this walking lark, and were completing the full path in stages. But they bore a trio of furrowed brows when the course ahead was mentioned.

"It's no picnic like," said the Falklands vet. "There's more mud than you can shake a log at, and you have to watch where you step, 'cause there's loose rocks everywhere."

By the time we returned to the loft the mood was sombre again. We ought to take whatever precautions we could, and decided at last to try out the overtrousers we'd been keeping for best.

"Mine may be a little snug, but I think they'll serve to keep out the worst of the weather," said Iain, squeezing himself into the overtrousers Laraine had lent him. Laraine's about five feet nothing. Iain's approx. six feet seven in his stockings, and growing. But he got into them and looked quite fetching posing before the full length mirror, his knobbly knees poking shyly out where Laraine's ankles should have been.

If Iain's were a tad skimpy, then mine were perhaps on the ample side. They had been kindly lent me on the day before departure by amply proportioned friend and builder, Derrick Hamley. Derrick's also not so vertically challenged as I and weighs in at a strapping 6 foot 4. So as I approached half way through the process of hauling on the navy blue nylon overtrousers it became clear that one size swamps all. In fact I had quite disappeared from view inside the overtrousers before my crotch met theirs. I could've happily gone camping in them, with a couple of tent poles. Anyway, with the judicious use of a bit of baling twine donated by the attentive Captain Cunningham, I was eventually able to secure them about my breasts and underarms, with a kind of hoist fashioned out of a pair of my socks and a towel to take up the slack amidships. Comfortable they were not. I'm not sure they would've been negotiable up the steeper slopes or around sharp bends. But they would at least keep some of the rain out in extremis.

We repacked the rucksacks for the umpteenth time since leaving Newquay, and stashed the overtrousers handy for a quick change, mid path. No.13 bade No. 17 farewell, and I returned her to the utensil pot. Duly prepared for the road, Iain turned to Mavis, the First Mate's assistant, and enquired, *soto voce*, so as not to draw attention to ourselves,

"Is there anywhere we can get a taxi, perhaps to West Downs?" He'd been studying the newly folded map, in hopes of avoiding the first, and really worst, bit of today's ordeal.

"Well yes, of course, but there's a bus stop over the road."

"What number bus to West Downs?"

"There's only the one. It hasn't got a number. Or a name for that matter. It's green. And it stops over there, outside the Peapod Gallery. In about ten minutes. You'd best hurry, it doesn't come again this week!"

So it's just after ten and we're bobbing along the country roads on the green bus with no number in a dim, dank mist. This hiking malarkey is easy when you get used to it.

"I was looking at the path description for the first part of today," explains Iain. "Judging from the state of those chaps in Port Isaac, and from what I've read, I thought we should conserve our resources for the big push homewards tomorrow. The plan is to join the path at Trebarwith Strand, avoiding the first bit, which looks slightly problematic." Iain passes me the Path Guide.

Problematic eh? I've come to recognise Iain's famous for his understatements. And it's a habit he shares with the 2001 South West Coast Path Guide. It's "9.1 miles, severe" according to the Guide, from Port Isaac to Tintagel. There's just a "small valley" to cross at St. Illickswell Gug, "where a boardwalk takes you across the marsh". On the climb up round the Barrett's Zawn cliffs "you will certainly see that there have been massive rock falls and that another will occur any time. Protective headgear, pitons and crampons are recommended in this hazardous location". "Then," continues the path description, with barely any embellishment from me, "you descend very steeply into the next stream valley at Ranie Point, and as you slide arse over tit down the stony slope you may well feel that the path here could be improved.

Some whinging namby pambies evidently complain about the staircases of steps on these valley sides, but they are so exceptionally bleeding steep we believe they are the best option.....” From here it seems the path is “long and very tough in parts”. The descents to the valley streams and up again on the other side are about the steepest on the whole of the Coast Path. It should not be attempted without food, energy, a well provisioned Swiss Army Knife and plenty of time in hand. And you should take paper and a pencil with you so that you will be able to draft your own nuncupative will in the event of serious life threatening injury. There are hideously steep steps, rock falls and streams to ford all the way, a mineworking adit to avoid and the detached and eroding piece of cliff ominously known as The Mountain to negotiate. And a collapsing tunnel to pass through.

It makes exciting reading, but I think Iain’s idea of taking the infinitely less scenic but more comfortable inland route, by bus, might be another one of his good calls. The bus ride is just as rewarding experientially, and it reminds me that I really should get myself a bus pass, now that I’m finally eligible.

The bus sets us down in the wilds of rural inland Cornwall and a dense pea souper. Unfortunately the driver’s not the most communicative, and when I ask him to point us in the approximate direction of civilisation he grunts something in pre-cambrian Cornish gaelic, lets out the clutch and with a demonic cackle lurches forward into the swirling mists.

“I think the bugger’s brought us too far,” opines Iain sadly. He’s blinking wildly, poring over the map in the drizzle. “There should be a pub ahead, if we’re in the right direction. It’s denoted by a blue tankard. On the map that is, not on the pub. But I can’t see a thing in this fog.”

We creep forwards in the murk, and I’m beginning to think we’re lost for the first time. Perhaps we should have stuck to the path, kept the sea on our left and ploughed on over the cliffs and the rocks. I would consult the compass and theodolite on my Swiss Army Knife, but I’m not sure I’d understand the implications of anything they might have to say. Better to stick with Iain’s intuition and the soggy map.

A sinister looking dark bulk of buildings looms up from the dense smoky grey folds ahead. “Moon’s Park” declares the mysteriously gothic black sign on the gate. Can we really have been transported in time and space to a lunar landscape? Have we made such a giant step for mankind here in the wilds of woolly Cornwall? Inspiration strikes! The name suddenly seems strangely familiar, and I grab the map from where it hangs, forgotten, about Iain’s neck.

Once I’ve disentangled Iain from the folds of the flapping map, I soon find “Moon’s Park”, almost hidden, on the extreme right hand border of the insert. We’re not lost! In fact we have about a quarter of a mile to go before Iain’s pub. Which is helpfully closed when we find it. But we take a left and we’re confidently heading for Treligga and Tregonnick Point, back to the coast. Ful-de-ree, ful-de-rah!

We rejoin what looks like the path through a field of gorse and scrub just north of The Mountain. The inland interlude was interesting, but most importantly we’ve conserved our resources for the rest of the day and the days ahead. The weather has lightened, and a watery sun glints shyly from a grey sea. As I peer back down the coast at some of the terrain we’ve missed, I can only thank Iain, silently, for the decision he made this morning in The Crow’s Nest.

Mind, we’re still not out of the woods, or should I say the rocks. At Backways Cove the descent into the stream valley is legendary, and the stepped climb back up to Dennis Point little short of ridiculous. We clamber manfully over the collapsed caves at tiny Port William, and descend again, slip sliding away over the damp rocks and wet grass, to Trebarwith Strand.

I’m still suffering with the right foot, a remnant of Daymer Bay and the wire fence. I’m much relieved to take off the rucksack and stretch my back into something approaching its normal stature. Iain’s already ordered tea from the Surfer’s Café where we sit and take stock of the morning’s events.

“You know we’ll have to seek out a rucksack mechanic at Tintagel,” Iain suggests. “I’m not sure the stitching on yours will hold much longer.”

He's right, of course. The rucksack has taken a severe battering from these incessant inclines and declines, not to mention the ups and downs. The stitching holding the main straps is parting from the body and is strained to gaping point. They'll not make it to Boscastle, let alone Bude.

"In fact the rucksack is defective," observes engineer Iain. "It's been improperly stitched in the manufacturing process. You're listing to starboard most of the time. I should take it back and demand restitution. And exemplary damages. Or something."

I daren't mention it only cost ten quid from a bucket shop, just before Christmas. Or that the shop is long gone.

"I think it must be the carrot batons."

"Haven't you eaten them yet?"

"Haven't started them."

"Don't tell me. Keeping them for best I suppose?"

"Probably."

Climbing out of Trebarwith Strand is a bit fierce, but once we've reached the cliff path I can yomp along and impress the professionals again. The path's much livelier today, much more populated. It's a fine Saturday afternoon in late March, and I imagine most of the walkers in these parts are locals. They're walking dogs, not carrying rucksacks or knapsacks. Some of them are in stilettos, and that's just the men. But we are close to Tintagel I suppose, and that'll be another world.

We've been heading for Tintagel Church all day, and although it was clearly visible from the window of the Crow's Nest last evening, yet it doesn't seem to have become appreciably larger. In fact as we reach the church, it's quite a modest affair. The view from the Crow's Nest must be, I conclude, an optical illusion, augmented by the Doombar ale. Probably.

"It's all to do with the co-efficient of linear expansion," Iain wisely explains. I still think it's a mirage.

Beyond the rather disappointing church we meet Guinness, a rotund but beautifully natured chocolate brown labrador retriever, with his rotund and elderly off-white owner. We exchange pats, but I think Guinness is more appreciative than

I. Guinness was privileged to meet Prince Charles last year, and to be patted by the royal hand.

We reach Tintagel Head and The Island (though it's not really an island, if you look carefully) at three o'clock, and stop for a photo shoot with No. 13. It's quite impressive as monuments go, I suppose. But if I'd had King Arthur's money power and influence, I'm not sure I'd have built my gaff just here, on the edge of the Atlantic, on a cliff covered in gull shit and with all them stairs to contend with. And it must have been a bugger to heat.

Dropping down from the cliff path we soon found ourselves in downtown Tintagel, in search of that most rare of traditional craft emporia, the rucksack repair shop. First stop was a tiny establishment selling "ethnic traditional locally sourced examples of fine footwear". I figured it was worth a try, and asked the trendy sixteen year old lad behind the counter for some stout thread and a large bodkin.

"What's one of them, like?"

"Well, it's a big pointy thing for making shoes, like."

"Oh, we don't make them. We just sell them, like. They're made in Taiwan, I think."

"Silly me! I thought they were sourced locally, like."

"Yeah. Locally in Taiwan, like."

He referred me to the keysmith down the road "who used to mend shoes, like." But I drew a blank there too, as it happened. The octogenarian down the road still made keys until quite recently, but his arthritis had got the better of him, and his last had been left in the past, a distant memory. Anyway, he's dead now, his ancient and hairy widow told me, so the question became academic. I was referred to the fishing tackle shop three doors away.

Which was closed. "Gone fishing! Not coming back," declared the sign in the window.

It was Iain who found "Tintagel Hardware", perhaps the only useful shop in this metropolis of knickknack shops and bogus religious ceremony. I entered in anticipation of some stout thread, a bodkin, perhaps four candles. I very nearly

introduced myself with “Got any “o’s”, but I thought better of this when I spied the ancient proprietress, and limited my request to a respectful

“Have you any stout thead, and perchance a large bodkin, young lady, with which I might effect repairs to this ailing but much beloved rucksack?”

Out of luck again. No call for that sort of thing these days, not on a Saturday in March etc. etc. I was getting desperate by this time, and my plea for assistance was laced with plaintiff cries, the welling of tears, the beating of my desolate breast. Etc. etc.

“Let me look at that young man,” came the reedy disembodied voice of the even ancients proprietor, from the dark and dusty depths of the hardware emporium. Mr. Tintagel Hardware cast his aged eyes over the remains of the ruinous rucksack, stood back to observe from all angles, scratched his head. Then I caught a twinkle in the old gentleman’s eyes.

“Rivets!” he declared loudly and enthusiastically. Iain thought he was entertaining us with his famous frog impressions. In fact he had come up with the inspired solution to my dilemma, one which has injected new life, new hope and new purpose into a rucksack that had very nearly given up the ghost so early in its young life. He disappeared into the bowels of the emporium and returned triumphant, bearing a super heavy duty industrial rivet gun and about a metric tonne of rivets in all shapes, sizes and colours, with a cornucopia of nuts, bolts, washers and clips to match. For the next twenty minutes or so we rolled around on the floor together, Mr. Tintagel Hardware and I, in a sort of mock courtship ritual, he wielding the gun, I squaring up with the reinforcing nuts and bolts. The end result was a masterpiece of engineering expertise, co-operation and joint working that will live to hike another day or two. And Mr. Tintagel Hardware would accept not a penny for his sterling efforts.

“I enjoyed mesel’”, he retorted. Iain placed a couple of quid in the charity box.

**“What a gent!” I exclaimed on leaving the emporium. “I wonder if he’s got a nut for my croc?”**

**“I shouldn’t push your luck, if I were you,” counselled the vigilant Iain.**

**Next stop was Boots the chemists. Yes, there is one other shop of some value in Tintagel. Boots were able to supply me with a tubigrip for my right ankle. It was about fourteen feet too long, but I had the good old Swiss Army Knife to sort that out.**

**Flushed with the successes of the day, we quickly repaired to the Pendrin Guest House in Atlantic Road, where we were welcomed by Mrs. Watson, who, for reasons that will become apparent, I shall hereinafter refer to as Mrs. Smegma. We were both pretty exhausted by the rigours of the day by this time, and decided on a pre-prandial snooze in the comfortable twin with ensuite in her large Victorian property.**

**oooOooo**

**Much later, Iain fancied a drink. Personally, I was in favour of a quiet night in with Mrs. Smegma. Perhaps a game of whist, a cup of cocoa and an early bed. But Iain insisted on bright lights, music, dancing and romance. Perhaps the hot spots, even Tintagel’s infamous the red light district. And he wouldn’t be dissuaded. So we showered and shaved, put on our best strides (that’s the other ones, the ones we hadn’t been crossing streams and cow fields in), and donned the trendy crocs. And we made off into the night for an evening of unremitting debauchery.**

**I can’t recall the name of the first hostelry we entered, but it was probably “King Arthur’s Gaff”, or something such. This was where the young and would-be trendies hang out. Not a bad drop of Doombur, but the menu, like the staff and clientele, was pretentious, pricey and ponsified. And I, for one, felt invisible. We downed one pint and made off for somewhere more to our liking. Which was the Coachman’s Inn.**

**Spacious, noisy, friendly and ever so slightly down-at-heel, a fair and accurate piss artist’s impression of the Coachman’s.**

A disco thrummed in the lounge bar, karaoke warbled in the public. Several layers of parties intermingled with the local clientele, overflowed into the garden room. We polished off the ample helpings of steak and chips, several pints of mulled Doombar, and a bottle or two of red wine that No.13 guarded jealously in the hearth while it reached a quaffable temperature. Then, to help with the digestion you understand, we moved on to a brandy. And another. And another. Etc.

Much of the evening at the Coachman's is a blur to me now. In fact it was then. At some time a fancy dress party spilled out of the snug, circled the lounge bar a couple of times like some maniacal conga, and flowed noisily but effortlessly into the ladies'. I think I somehow got tangled up in it and carried onwards past reception to the beergarten. Where Iain was during all this is a mystery to me yet. Suffice to say that, somehow, we did get back to Mrs. Smegma's sometime in the early hours, complete with No.13 and the suit of armour we found in Atlantic Road.

What will always remain a mystery is the false moustache I found stuck to my forehead like some huge and inappropriate eyebrow, when I awoke.

## 7. BEARS AND BOXES

**“Just for the minutes, Iain, what happened last night after the third brandy?” I was lying on my bed, still in the Superman pyjamas I couldn’t recall putting on, trying to write up yesterday’s journal. I really wasn’t up to it when I got back from the Coachman’s, whenever that was.**

**“Well now, please tell me you do recall the Latvian waitress.”**

**“Not really, no. In what context, exactly?”**

**“In the context of you offering her a part in your next film.”**

**“Oh God, what film’s that then?”**

**“I don’t know, you tell me. At least you were wearing the moustache when you interviewed her. So I don’t think she’ll recognise you. You told her you were incognito, something to do with a cultural mission.”**

**“Oh my Lord. I’d better leave the moustache here then. With the suit of armour.”**

**“Yes, by the way, what became of the suit of armour?”**

**“I hid it in the wardrobe. Mrs. Smegma will find it when we’ve gone. I’m sure she’ll not mind.”**

**“Why do you call her Mrs. Smegma? Her name’s Watson, isn’t it?”**

**“Yes, but she reminds me of Bill Bryson’s Mrs. Smegma. The landlady of the Bournemouth B. & B. in his “Notes from a Small Island”. She had rules for everything. You know, when you were allowed in, when you could use the bog, how long you could use the electric fire. Etc. Typical landlady of the fifties and sixties. Our Mrs. Watson reminds me of her, so to me she’ll always be Mrs. Smegma. Anyway, I couldn’t find any rules about suits of armour, so I think we’re safe to leave it in the wardrobe.”**

**Breakfast at Mrs. Smegma’s was ample, if a little indifferent in presentation. She apologised for being a one woman band in this great barn of a house. Her husband was in the process of being operated on in the local infirmary. I didn’t enquire what for, but gathered it was nothing too serious, but it had left her single handed. I was still sticking with the full English, but Iain sensibly opted for the fishy alternative. We sat in silence amidst the heavy dark oak furniture and silver service, nursing the remnants of headaches, contemplating the array of ornaments and framed photographs. The early sun sliced**

through a gap in the velour curtains and chintzy nets, danced on Iain's forehead.

I'd prepared myself for the day ahead with the aid of the trusty Swiss Army Knife. Between the thing for helping old ladies across the road faster and the sweep's brush I discovered a nifty pair of decorator's scissors and some pinking shears, with which I was able to fashion a comfortable ankle support out of the tubigrip. This certainly seemed to minimise the discomfort in the right ankle, which was already on the wane by this time, if I'm honest.

So, with rucksacks mounted and boots laced, we left the Pendrin Guest House and Mrs. Smegma and joined the pagan ritual that was processing right outside her front door.

"The path starts just over there," Iain pointed with his right index, cleverly maintaining the rhythmic shake of the tambourine that had been thrust into his left hand at Mrs. Smegma's gate.

"Do you think we can make a tactical withdrawal from this parade at that point then? The straps on this base drum are killing me, and I can't see a thing. No. 13's having trouble with the triangle."

At the end of Atlantic Road we ditch the instruments, make some feeble excuses, and scuttle across a muddy field to join the path. We're both still feeling a little delicate after last night's excesses, but the day is fine and bright and the going straightforward, at least as far as Boscastle. The Guide describes this stretch as "4.6 miles, moderate".

We're making good progress now. The tubigrip's doing its therapeutic job, and we're marching along the cliff path at a steady pace. The Willapark headland and Lye Rock are known for terns, gannets and sheerwaters, but as we're neither of us professional twitchers and the binoculars on the Swiss Army Knife have limitations outside an opera house, we pass swiftly on to Bossiney Haven and Rocky Valley.

The first serious decline of the day, the slope and steps down to Rocky Valley and up the other side after the dinky little footbridge, are tiring, but not dangerous. And the valley has

about it a remote and tantalising charm that makes the climb worth while. “Look for seals in the surging sea as you cross the footbridge, and for the dippers that feed in the water of the stream”, advises the 2001 Guide. Well, we don’t see any such, but then I’ve got my eye glued on the path ahead. At Trewethet Gut the inlet is badly eroded. The path is diverted for safety’s sake, and soon we’re skirting round a hideous cliff top caravan site, which detracts from the dramatic rock pinnacles below Trevalga Cliff.

The two sweet young things coming round the headland don’t look particularly well provisioned for distance walking. One has a pink sort of handbag on her back, but there must be precious little in it. The other’s carrying a camera.

“Where’re you two off to?” challenges Iain.

“We thought we’d get to Port Isaac. Why?”

“It’s quite a way, you know. Quite hard going,” Iain’s getting paternal.

“Oh, we’ll be fine, thanks,” she chirrups, and off they skip, heading for the high life at The Crow’s Nest, no doubt.

Past Long Island and Short island (though there’s no appreciable difference in size) we yomp, stopping for a brief photo opportunity just after Firebeacon Hill where the jagged and menacing Ladies Window, an ancient arch hewn out of the crazed rock points accusingly at all comers.

“Well will you just look at thaaat!” Iain’s reverted to his hidden Essex roots. His vowels are about as open as I’ve known them. “Those seagulls are shagging!”

“Can you mean they are indulging in some sort of elaborate courtship ritual?” I retort, mindful of the need to maintain standards of decorum in these rural climes.

“No, they’re just shagging! Sort of a feathered fuck fest.”

Sure enough, the rocks are littered with courting couples of seagulls, giving each other a good seeing to.

“Well, I suppose it’s spring, and this is Cornwall, after all.”

I find the short but steep descent into the stream valley at Grower Gut a tad nerve racking, and the stream is forded at

high water by a series of granite stepping stones, which we have to negotiate with care. From here it's a bit of a climb back to the cliff path and then a moderate but muddy yomp down into Boscastle for tea.

Postdiluvian Boscastle is much as it always was, and a very great deal has been done to restore this pretty and ancient village to its former glory. We stroll happily across the new bridge, pleased to have reached this stage today before noon. The tea and brief respite at the café has been well earned, and the enchanting oriental waitress is a bonus. She must be Thai, Korean, Japanese at least. And is that lotus blossom she sports seductively in the high coiffed, jet black silk-shiny hair?

“Cambodian actually, and it's orange blossom. Two teas, thank you very much.” She's clairvoyant too. Hope she can't read minds, for yet again I'm in love. I must at least take a snap of her cuddling No.13. For the album you understand.

### The Agony and the Ecstasy

The next four and a half hours of this, the penultimate day of the historic 2010 Ferguson/Pugsley expedition may be summarised in a few bullet points.

#### The Agony:

- L Clambering on all fours out of Boscastle up Penally Hill to the Point. There's no warning, just an almost sheer rock face loosely interspersed with fiercely daunting steps, hundreds of them, cut into the muddy gorse strewn path. A foretaste of
- L Beeny Cliff, which is of course much worse. I don't count the steps, don't have the breath or the spirit to. But there are certainly thousands, probably millions. Each one takes an effort of extreme will, and I must pause for breath and to let the heart beat subside after ten, then psych myself up for the next ten. Once you're a quarter of the way up you're committed. There's no going back. My lungs are bursting and the blood's pounding in my ears. Hope the heart's strong enough for all this. Assistance is remote.

- L Twisting and turning on the descent through the gorse and bramble at Rusey Cliff, inevitable because of the rock falls here. We are cut to ribbons. More rock falls look imminent.
- L The awesome climb up and along High Cliff, reputedly the highest point on the Coast Path in Cornwall, and “best avoided when there’s a gale” (South West Path Coast Guide 2001). Well, there is a gale, fortunately blowing onshore, or we might well be blown off.
- L The nervous descents down Beeny and High Cliff, stabbing at the mud with my stick in a vain attempt to reduce speed and get a grip.

### The Ecstasy

- J The adventure and exhilaration of yomping along the cliff path in the sunshine, a boy of 60, inches away from dire injury and death on the razor edged cliffs below
- J The dramatic cascading waterfall at Pentargon
- J The seals gambolling in the surging waves off Gull Rock
- J The wild goats clinging precariously to the gorse and the scrub and the bramble which dress these cliffs in a sort of wild, haphazard garland
- J Encounters with highland cattle, these gentle woolly, wet muzzled creatures with their curious grin and warm breath.

The rain starts at three o’clock, as promised, but it’s far from torrential, and the overtrousers stay stashed in the rucksacks, for best. By the time we descend through the fields to Crackington Haven at four thirty, I think both of us are shot.

I’m studying the oracle on Iain’s chest. He’s glazing over. Either I’ve overdone it with the interesting wit and repartee, or he’s feeling the fatigue of the last four hours.

“According to the map, there’s a pub and a café at Crackington. And a phone box, which is handy as I can’t get signal here. I’ve got to phone for our lift.” Iain grunts his approval.

“I shouldn’t expect too much, if I were you. I came here once before. It was closed.”

The phone box was the first disappointment. We hadn't been able to use the mobiles much along the north Cornwall coast. Here at Crackington they were both, as usual, signalless. The public call box only took phone cards, no cash. A sign on the door rather helpfully announced that phone cards were readily available and could be had, on application to your nearest Post Office. Nearest Post Office, Boscastle.

"Oh, I'll just nip back for one then. Or onward, perchance, to Bude." The irony and sarcasm was lost on Iain. It'd been a long day, and we were both in need of sustenance. Quite urgently.

At that very moment, the only café in Crackington Haven shut and bolted its doors, and the proprietor made for home. She just wouldn't be persuaded or bribed to open them again, this side of Christmas. And the only pub in Crackington bore a rather obvious and imposing "WE'RE SHUT!" sign.

"Well then, to put it politely, we're bugged. Mr. Holmes, the proprietor of "Bears and Boxes" has kindly undertaken, at no cost to us but considerable inconvenience to himself, to retrieve us from this benighted place and deliver us unto salvation, namely his bed and breakfast establishment in nearby Dizzard. But I do need to summons him. By some form of telephonic or telegraphic means of communication. I would use the aldis lamp on my Swiss Army Knife, but that rather depends on Mr. Holmes being able to see my message from distant Dizzard, and understand morse code. Which also rules out the semaphore flags. And I don't think thought transference works in Cornwall"

But Iain wasn't laughing any more. And the seriousness of our desperate situation was changing the humour in my voice to hysteria.

"The pub and the café are closed. There's nothing here to eat or to do, I'm afraid." He was about twenty, spare, athletic in a scrawny sort of way. His lank wet hair dripped on to the wetsuit and trainers. "I'm off to Port Isaac. Must be something to eat there."

"It's quite a step, you know," I offered, "and the going's hard to bloody. You've only got about an hour of daylight left."

**“Best get a wiggle on then. Bye!” he laughed. And he’d gone, like some two footed mountain goat, leaping headlong up the cliff in the general direction of Tintagel and beyond.**

**On closer examination, the pub wasn’t closed. The place was humming with late drinkers, the two sweet young things with their American boyfriends last seen at The Rumps, Guinness the chocolate Labrador. My whole life, or at least the last four days, flashed before me.**

**I ordered tea for two, settled Iain in a comfortable chair, plumped up his cushions and asked could I use the phone? I was directed to the payphone in the lobby which, praise be, took normal coin of the realm.**

**Rob Holmes appeared in a trice, long before we’d drained the last of the Earl Grey. He whisked us away to his retreat a couple of miles away in Dizzard.**

**“Pray tell, Rob, why do you call it Bears and Boxes?”  
“Well, when we started out eight years ago, we needed to call it something. So we took the B and B of course. Then my wife Fran likes bears. All sorts of bears. You’ll notice when we get there. And she also collects boxes, so we decided on Bears and Boxes. Nothing more sinister than that.”**

**Rob, it transpired, was an engineer turned software designer, so there was an instant rapport between him and Iain. Fran (I later discovered this was short for Françoise) was born in Bristol, brought up in Mauritius, and returned to England to train as a nurse. Both found the back door somewhere in Birmingham about eight years ago and swivelled down here to run Bears and Boxes.**

**“I love it here,” added Fran. “It really is the closest thing to living in the colonies. Cornwall is another country.”**

**Our accommodation for the last night abroad was the best yet, and Iain was generous with his plaudits for my choice. A comfortable twin with ensuite and all the extras. Including rather a lot of bears. I’ll not trouble the reader with elaborate descriptions. You should just go and see for yourself.**

**“I shouldn’t go in there for a bit, Iain. There’s an ASBO on it.”  
My warning is for the unsuspecting Iain, who I suspect would  
also like to avail himself of the facilities.**

**“Come again?”**

**“An ASBO. Or Anti Social Bog Order. Temporary, of course.  
I’d give it five minutes if I were you. I’m going to join Mr.  
Holmes and his family in the television lounge.”**

**Dinner would be ready at seven. When I’d booked our stay at  
Bears and Boxes I’d taken the precaution of booking the  
optional evening meal, as eating establishments in Dizzard  
are few and far between. That is to say there aren’t any. Fran  
had offered to prepare something satisfying and substantial  
for two footsore and weary travellers. Quite what it would be  
I’d left entirely to her creative discretion, with no dietary  
peccadilloes or preferences to hinder her, though I did recall  
mention of something she called a “nursery pudding”.**

**FRAN HOLMES' MENU FOR TWO FOOTSORE AND WEARY  
TRAVELLERS**

**Bears and Boxes, 28 March 2010**

**Starter**

**Generous slices of duck breast, delicately roasted and served on a bed of savoury fruit salad, including tomato, lettuce, blueberries, strawberries, cranberries, avocado and cumquat, with a raspberry and lychee coulis.**

**Main**

**Richly succulent lamb, rosemary and apricot casserole, served with lashings of utterly mouth wateringly smooth sweet potato, parsnip and potato mash, and oodles of fresh seasonal vegetables**

**Afters (to call it sweet does it no justice at all)**

**A selection of as much as you can eat of any or all of the following:**

**A vast vat of home made amaretto ice cream**

**An enormous cauldron of home made vanilla ice cream, flavoured with fresh vanilla from the family estates in**

**Mauritius**

**A mountainous golden fruit crumble**

**A magnum of steaming rich yellow custard**

**A keg of fresh and glutinous Cornish clotted cream**

**A giant glittering platter of many flavoured and variously**

**coloured home made meringues, in all shades of the rainbow**

**A bottomless tub of raisins steeped in dark rum.**

**“I have an issue with cholesterol. Been on medication for years.” I mentioned to Iain, as wistfully as I could, when the table’s groaning had subsided a little.**

**“So you won’t be indulging in the ice cream then?”**

**“On the contrary. After all them tablets the cholesterol must be too low. I’m sure it needs a top up. That’s my position anyway, for the minutes.”**

**Bears and Boxes doesn’t boast a liquor licence, so far as I’m aware. Although one wall of the dining room was extravagantly decorated with a colourful array of wines from around the world, and both Rob and Fran seemed to be of the bon viveur persuasion, we didn’t embarrass them with a request for alcoholic refreshment. It would do us good, we agreed, to take to an early bed, sober and replete, for an early start for home in the morning.**

**“Fancy a cup of tea, Iain? It’s all here. You can have Assam, Kenyan, Earl or Lady Grey, Broken Orange Pekoe, Chinese Green or Hisbiscus. Then there’s instant, fresh ground or filter coffee, Colombian, Puerto Rican, Costa Rican, Ersatzkaffee and decaf, espresso or latte. Maybe you’d like a Horlicks, plain or chocolate, Ovaltine, Bovril, Marmite, or perhaps a fruit tea. There’s lemon and ginger, peppermint and olive, artichoke and melon, or perhaps a camomile infusion to help you sleep. Whaddya fancy? Eh?”**

**He was fast asleep.**

## 8. BUDE OR BUST

Our walking attire had by Monday morning acquired a colour, a texture and perhaps an aroma redolent of the exotic locations we had visited, the hardships we'd endured and the scrapes we'd gotten into. Liberally besmirched with mud, blood, grass and sweat, sea, sand and pond water, and other stains of dubious origin, they'd been unceremoniously draped over the radiators of the B & B's over night in a successful, if squalid, attempt to dry them for the morning. Here at Bears and Boxes they had appeared, dry and aired by Fran's tumble dryer in a laundry bag on our door handle at bed time.

"On the burning question of "rucksack" versus "knapsack", Iain, I've been doing some research. While you slept, I've settled the question that has troubled you so ever since we started on this expedition." Iain hung on my every word. Eager to learn from the fruits of my researches, he pricked up his ears, focused attention on what I had to impart. Although I couldn't see him in the loo, I knew that's what he must be doing.

"Really, what's that then?"

"You know, the difference between a rucksack and a knapsack. Essential knowledge for any hill walker. It's in the degree course, I believe."

"Go on then, pray enlighten me."

"Well now, according to Chambers' Dictionary, which I discovered in Rob's library in the early hours, both have a Teutonic derivation. "Rucksack" is from the German "Rucke", meaning "back", and "Sack", meaning sack or bag. It's simply a bag carried on the back. "Knapsack", on the other hand, comes from the Dutch "knap", meaning "eat". It was originally a bag for carrying snacks in. So, I conclude, to qualify as a "rucksack" the item needs merely to be capable of carrying things on a person's back. However, to constitute a "knapsack", there must be an element of comestibility in the items carried therein, or at least some of them. It can thus be seen, that whilst you own a mere "rucksack", I am the proud possessor of the far superior and more reverential "knapsack". On account of the carrot batons. I rest my case. Or my knapsack."

"Absolutely fascinating, I'm sure," comes Iain's reply. He's clearly enthralled. Or something.

**“Get yourself a sexy little banana, stick it in your common or garden “rucksack”, and, hey presto, you’ll have a fully fledged “knapsack”.”**

**“Marvellous. I’m so glad you told me.”**

**Fran’s breakfast was as lavish, varied and satisfying as the feast of the night before. Forty two different varieties of cereal I counted. Six varieties of yoghurt were on offer to add, if wanted, to the panoply of exotic fresh fruits—pineapple, mango, strawberries, passion fruit, figs, raspberries and bilberries. And my last and very best full English of the trip. Because we both bottled out on the fried slice, which she normally supplies in the shape of little teddy bears, she substituted bubble and squeak bears, which complimented perfectly the eggs, bacon, sausages, beans, tomatoes, black pudding and hash browns. And tea and coffee in abundance, a mountain of toast from home made bread, and a dozen or so home made preserves.**

**“It’s been a pleasure to serve you two young men,” she beamed. Giving us both a hug, she wished us well for the rest of the walk. “Where are you making for today?”**

**“Bude, and home,” answered Iain. “It’s supposed to be 10.2 miles strenuous, but Rob’s going to walk us back to the path nearest to here. We’ll miss the first, and hardest bit.”**

**“In that case, you should do it by eleven thirty or twelve. You’ve only got Millook to deal with. Then it’s plain sailing.”**

**“I thought more like middle of the afternoon,” Iain’s puzzled.**

**“Well I’ve done Bude from here by eleven. Mind you, I was cross. Very cross.”**

**Rob Holmes leads us through the mud and the piles of rusting machinery at East Dizzard’s unkempt farmyard.**

**“I’ve got contractual access rights here,” he explains, “Stay close and you’ll be all right.” He leaves us at a stile, thanks us for our custom, points the way ahead. I am not to know that this kind and generous man is to suffer a heart attack and be hospitalised in a couple of days. I only find that out later when I phone Fran for her recipe for sweet potato mash. If he’s reading this, I wish him a speedy recovery and many more years at Bears and Boxes.**

We join the cliff path just above Cancleave Strand and yet another Gull Rock. There's a canopy of grey glowering clouds above, but the rain's holding off, we're replete and refreshed after Bears and Boxes, and we're yomping along through the mud at a rate of knots. Ful-de-ree, ful-de-rah!

"That'll be Millook, our last serious climb," Iain's indicating the dark and fearsome stepped valley that looms ahead. But we hang a right just after the Raven's Beak and the steepest bit of our descent into Millook is on a metalled road. Strolling now, past the ancient mill after which this place takes its name, across the stream bridge and up the other side. It's a bit of a bastard too, one of those ten steps at a time capers, then check the pulse rate, pat all pockets to ensure you haven't lost anything, a deep intake of oxygen from the breathing apparatus on the Swiss Army Knife, and carry on.

At the top there's another stile to scale before we can stop, take stock, rest a moment on the bench ("Fred and Daisy liked it here a lot") and resume the cliff path at Bridwill Point. From up here we view the sands of Widemouth Bay, journey's end at Bude and, in the hazy distance, Hartland Point.

Widemouth (locally pronounced Widdymouth) Bay is one of many surfing Meccas on the North Cornwall coast. Today there are one or two punters, perfunctorily skulling about in the shallows. It's pretty nondescript and end-of-the-pier really. But it's got perhaps the last facilities until Bude, and it's worth stopping here to take on tea before the long stretch northwards.

"Tea for two please, Miss, and a photo of you and No. 13, if I may be so bold," I propose to the pretty young thing behind the counter. This has become a bit of a habit. I must have a picture of every half presentable waitress serving tea along the North Cornwall coast, all holding No.13 aloft, all wearing the half bemused, half disbelieving smile of someone trying their best to humour a grizzled old fart with a whimsical spoon.

The long stretch northwards, to which I have alluded above, is easy going now, for us professionals. We're motoring along on the level, if damp and gluey, path, past Lower Longbeak,

Higher Longbeak, Abe's Rock and Philip's Point. The coast is to the left, the road to the right, and there's nothing between us and it. I mean quite literally nothing. Which is why, when at last I am caught by the call of nature, there's nothing in the nature of a bush, not so much as a frond of pampas grass, not a fag paper, to conceal my person. Iain's out of sight in the folds of distant Efford Down, blissfully unaware of my dilemma, the agony of my indecision. Do I risk reputation, prosecution and all, here in the wilds of uncertain Cornwall, and take the chance of a public pee? Or do I maintain public decorum at the risk of private shame, take the warm, damp alternative to sure and certain public rebuke.

There's a telephone box on the coast road, just outside Upton in the County Parish of Bude-Stratton, and it comes to my rescue as the salty taste in the back of my throat peaks. It's just tall and broad enough to secrete myself behind, safe from the prying eyes of passing travellers. And so it is with gratitude that I dedicate this chapter and my modesty to Alexander Graham Bell and British Telecom.

I'll have to get a wiggle on now to catch Iain before Bude. The path's wet and slimy here, and a bit up and down, but it's almost dead straight, so I shouldn't get lost and I can afford to stride it out. The walk soon becomes a power walk, then a trot. I'm about to break into an unseemly gallop when I miss my footing for the first time since the fateful wire fence in Daymer Bay.

Now I'm tobogganing down a mucky slope on the knapsack, making good time as it happens, and I'm quietly thankful for the carrot batons, which seem to have saved me from serious injury. I must travel several hundred metres in this makeshift luge arrangement before Iain grabs me by the knapsack straps and sets me gently back to rights on my feet.

"What was that all about, Keith? Sitting down on the job?"

"I thought I'd just make a dash for the finish line, you know, end the walk in style."

"Well, there's no hurry now. That's Compass Point, behind the watch tower. And that's Bude down there. We've done the bugger!"

oooOooo

Now of course I had intended calling Gilly on the mobile when we were still about an hour and a half out. This would have given her sufficient time to make it to Bude to welcome home the conquering heroes and conduct us home to Long Lane. Unfortunately, as the reader will recall, there was always difficulty with the signal along the coast path, and anyway, the logistics associated with giving an accurate ETA at Bude were insurmountable. At least that was my excuse for delaying my call until our actual arrival in Bude.

We yomped down the hill and along the canal into the town at half past one on Monday 29<sup>th</sup>. March 2010, just in time for lunch. There are two pubs near the car park where Gilly was to meet us. One is a rather posh affair, with suited types sipping wine, quaffing G's and T's, ladies in hats crooking fingers around small sherries. So, out of respect for the upholstery and carpets, we plumped for the slightly dingier alternative, and spent the next couple of hours sampling the local brews, celebrating journey's end and relaxing after the rigours of the past six days.

“Hello, love, it's me, the much beloved. You OK?”

“Well, I'm just rodding the drains again. We've got a blockage. Where are you?”

“We're about an hour and a half outside of Bude. Probably.”

“So what's the music in the background?”

“Oh, nothing. Must be Iain's Ipod. We'll be in Bude in about an hour and a half. Will you pick us up, as arranged?”

“Yes, OK, when I've finished fixing the exhaust. Who's that singing?”

“Just a happy hiker, dearest. We're a jolly sort, us hikers. Ful-de-ree, ful-de-rah, you know!”

“What's that laughter? Sounds like a party going on.”

“Really? I mean no, not really. Er, I think it's just some innocent horseplay amongst the younger hikers. Et cetera.”

“I'll be there in a couple of hours. Don't drink too much.”

“No dear, I mean yes, thanks dear. See you soon dear.”

## **9. THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL HILL WALKING**

**Hurrah and Ful-de-ree! Iain has just confirmed I've passed the "A" Level in coastal hill walking. Now I can enrol on the degree course.**

**Here are some of the more important lessons gleaned from the expedition. They'll no doubt set me in good stead for the future of my hill walking career. I hope you find them instructive.**

- I. A one pound bag of carrot batons will last at least six days and sixty five miles bouncing about in the bottom of a knapsack, and still be edible, at least to a goat. And they make fine ballast, if needed, in high winds, for example. Never be without them.**
- II. Good quality, stout and purpose built walking boots are essential for successful hill walking. In my experience, pink boots are best.**
- III. Make sure your Swiss army knife has a powerful industrial quality rivet gun attachment, for effecting essential repairs to your equipment.**
- IV. Be sure to carry at least one roll of lavatory paper, even if, like me, you keep it for best.**
- V. Keep your intake of incohol to a minimum, and you'll avoid gout.**
- VI. Take a good pair of waterproof overtrousers with you, and try them for size before you set off.**
- VII. Always have by you a selection of nuts and bolts to effect roadside repairs to your crocs. Half inch AF or 10mm. metric should do the trick.**
- VIII. Be sure to keep your trousers on in the presence of landladies.**
- IX. Beware of barmaids in camper vans.**
- X. A false moustache should always be kept about your person when hill walking. If an urgent need suddenly presents itself to travel incognito, you can quickly withdraw your moustache and hey presto, become a master of disguise!**

**Happy hill walking to you all. Ful-de-ree, ful-de-rah!**

**T H E E N D . . . . F O R T H E  
T I M E B E I N G**

**Keith Pugsley, May 2010.**