

Newport Outdoor Group



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Editors

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**Get
The
Outdoor
Habit!**

OFFA'S DYKE Path (ODP) Part 1

February 10th May to 19th May 2013

By Brian Turner (a member of the Steadfast Seven)

Participants (in alphabetical order): Brian, Jackie, Julian, Mary, Nigel, Norman and Sally

DAY 1, Friday 10th May: Five travelled up from Newport to Prestatyn by train together; a very pleasant journey of just over 3 hours duration. Sally travelled from Nailsea on a later train. Mary arrived in Prestatyn via Dublin and Holyhead after a few days holiday in Ireland, following her flight "over the pond". We all stayed at the HQ Hotel which was situated approximately half a mile south of the rail station. Offa's Dyke Path starts at the Prestatyn sea front, some half a mile north of the rail station.

After booking in the hotel, NJR wisely decided that we should walk to the sea front, collect a pebble from the beach at the waters edge, take photographs of the official start of our walk and thus save us a 2 mile walk on Day 2. The tourist information centre on the sea front, which houses the Offa's Dyke Centre, was unfortunately closed. Our evening meal was taken at a sea front tavern.

DAY 2, Saturday 11th May: After a very enjoyable breakfast and with a 12 mile walk ahead of us, we set off in good spirits. Out of town the path rises fairly steeply with good views of the North Wales coastline. To the north are the Dee Estuary, the Wirral and Merseyside. To the west, the Great Orm and the mountains of Snowdonia could be clearly seen.

Lunch was taken at Rhualt and then we crossed the busy A55 by a pedestrian footbridge. We skirted around the edge of Moel Maen-Efa (290 m), on over Cefn Du into Sodom (as the guide book says, "There is no Gomorrah in the locality") and thankfully no deviants in our party, (to my knowledge anyway!)

Then, on the way to Bodfari (the end of the day's walk), a rather bizarre event occurred. I was in the middle of our group and I turned around to see a small middle aged lady walking with our back-marker. I jokingly said, "Would you like to join our party?" I engaged the lady in general conversation mentioning that we were walking to Bodfari and there a Mrs Price would collect us to take us on to her guest house at Plas Penucha. The lady said that she knew Mrs. Price. Before we went our separate way I asked the lady her name. Low and behold it was Mrs. Gladys Edwards who had originally taken our booking for that night and then decided not to fulfil the contract and Mrs E passed the booking onto Mrs P. Perhaps Mrs E had laid in wait for us knowing that seven trekkers would march through the village sometime that afternoon, and was curious to see what South Walians looked like. I trust that Mrs E was impressed!

As we approached Bodfari a telephone call was made to Mrs. P to co-ordinate transport for the 6 mile road transfer. The arrangement was for us to wait at the bus stop on the A541, just 200 m south west of the Downing Arms. We had to pass the pub to get to the bus stop. Guess what?



THE STEADFAST SEVEN IN GOOD SPIRITS AT THE START OF THE ODP

OFFA'S DYKE FACT FILE

It is a massive earthwork that delineated the Anglian kingdom of Mercia and the Welsh kingdom of Powys

It was built on the orders of the Anglo-Saxon ruler Offa in the 8th Century

It was designed to protect Mercia from raids and attacks from Powys

In places the dyke is up to 65 feet wide and 8 feet high.

The footpath is 177 miles long

A scout was sent out and the message came back that Mrs P and her son-in-law were waiting at the bus stop in separate cars and we were all gathered up safely and driven to Plas Penucha, which was a charming spacious country house in its own grounds. The original farmhouse dates back to 1550, part of that has been incorporated in the present house.

The most recent extensions are in the "arts and crafts" style. Mrs P cooked us a sumptuous evening meal and invited us to use her sitting room, which was oak panelled and had a cosy log burning stove. Some gardening was done by one of the party.

Day 3, Sunday 12th May: We ate a hearty breakfast and then after a rapid transfer from Plas Penucha to Bodfari, we set out on what was to be the toughest day of eight. The plan was to walk to Gweryd Lake Lodge, a distance of 15 miles with a total ascent of 1085 m over the Clwydian Hills via a series of iron age (or earlier) hill forts. We made good progress and ate lunch in the wind and rain at the stump of the Jubilee Tower on top of Moel Famau (555 m). The tower stump is being refurbished (in my humble opinion it needs demolishing and rebuilding to a more pleasing design). It has a series of toposcopes to help identify the various panoramas that can be seen on a clear day.

The Jubilee Tower (*photo below appears courtesy of Vertigogen at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/vertigogen/8155680471/>*) was intended to commemorate the 50th year of the reign of George III. The foundation stone was laid in 1810 and the tower, designed in the Egyptian style, was planned to reach a height of 150 ft., but the tower was never completed and in 1862 the incomplete tower collapsed, leaving just the stump.

After the Jubilee Tower we walked down to Bwlch Penbarra, skirted around Foel Fenlli (511 m) and Moel Eithinen down to Clwyd Gate on the A494, with 12 miles of hard walking behind us. After Clwyd Gate I remember an appalling sight of what must have been at least 130 steps up the steep hill side. Fortunately we only had to climb a couple of flights totalling about 30 steps; ODP diverted around to the right of the hill, to my great relief!

At this stage we were all very tired and when we came within 1.50 miles of our destination, the sight of one more steep hill, (Moel y Plas), was far too much for one member of the party who cried, "Enough is enough – I am not going up there". So five of the faithful went up the path and over the hill to Gweryd Lake Lodge. The other two went along the lane which went down and down and down and then up and up and up! The two covered at least 1.5 miles, or maybe more, and probably the same gain in height as the other five, but at least it was more gradual.

The two found the other five waiting at the Lodge and after "roping in" the Lodge proprietor, Jeanette, who was tending her horses. We settled into our accommodation, cooked our readymade evening meal and had an early night to rest our weary bones.

Day 4, Monday 13th May:

We breakfasted in the Lodge Café cooked by Sharon, served by Jeanette and plenty of it. Then back to the trail.



We passed several animal carcasses, evidence of a hard winter on this hill farm, with fishing lake and B&B as a sideline. Our next stop was elevenses at the village of Llandegla with its memorial hall and village shop cum post office and tea room with outside loo !! They were quite security conscious in this village with a barrel bolt to both the inside and the outside of the loo door. I was tempted to play a trick on one or two of the party who needed relief, but I assure you, no one got locked in the lavatory!! The loo wall had a picture of Cliff Richard – this no doubt brightened up the day for users of the facility!

Refreshed and relieved we sped on through a forested area and along a mountain road approaching World's End. NJR warned us that the end of the world may be nigh, so we were all very nervous indeed, but what did we find? Just a hairpin bend in the road with a shallow stream flowing over the road. Above the road was a worked-out quarry face and I think that world's end probably came from the quarry men – end of the quarry face.

We left World's End and the road as we followed a track across the screes below the escarpment known as Eglwyseg Crag. Ahead was Dinas Bran Castle which overlooks Llangollen. The track eventually dropped down to a lane and we heard the noise of two scrambler bikes ridden by youths. They flashed by at great speed and the writer indicated to them to slow down. We rounded a bend and 200 metres further on we saw a maroon coloured saloon car stationary on the road with a damaged windscreen and largely detached rear bumper and a distressed elderly lady driver. The two bikers had obviously not heeded my advice to slow down and one had separated from his machine, hit the windscreen of the lady's car, rolled over the top of the car, landed on the road at the rear of the car, brushed himself down, collected his machine which had hit the offside front of the car and ripped off the rear bumper and the lad then rode off. All in the life of an irresponsible biker. We NOGs loosened the rear bumper fixing and helped the lady put it inside the car, hoping that the police managed to track down the lad responsible for the damage.

Our walk continued. We reached the turn off to Llangollen, whereupon the heavens opened and we were drenched. However, it was all downhill for two miles and we had the bonus of seeing a fantastic, low level, brilliant rainbow.

We stayed the night at the excellent Llangollen independent hostel, which had a large and much appreciated basement drying room to accommodate our wet clothes and boots.

Day 5, Thursday 14th May: It was self-cooked porridge, other cereals, fruit juice and piles of toast, tea etc for breakfast. The proprietor Arlo, who just happened to be a rugby-mad Welshman then appeared and was delighted to meet NJR and after a lengthy discussion about the good prospects of Jamie and the Lions down under, we all set off in good spirits along the lane back to ODP, two miles of uphill walking, then a really lovely walk with the great views of the Vale of Llangollen, down through Trevor Hall Wood, (very mossy and mysterious), then along the canal towpath which led us via the canal basin, for turning and passing of barges, onto one of the many highlights of ODP, namely the Pontcysyllte Aquaduct; more than 200 years old and still looking in magnificent condition.



The photograph of the amazing landmark (shown left) appears courtesy of Nigel.

The walk continued and soon the splendid Chirk Castle, (built early 14th century. now owned by National Trust), came into view, but alas our schedule did not permit time to visit.

After Castle Mill and a lunch stop we dyked for the first time (i.e. we walked a stretch on the Dyke). After Craignant we ascended Selattyn Hill and after reading about the history of Selattyn Tower on the railway signal typed notice board; we decide to walk up the tower. The old rectory in Selattyn village where we were to stay the night is due east of the tower and we felt sure that there would be a footpath from the tower to the village. In the event we had to try and make our own footpath and we ended up struggling through gorse and broom bushes and finished up in somebody's back garden! By this time it was raining heavily so we all arrived at Mrs Maggie Barnes's Old Rectory in Selattyn in a pretty soggy state. Maggie and her husband were excellent hosts; they took care of our wet garments and boots and provided tea and later served a super evening meal in their spacious dining room. We spent the evening chatting in the equally spacious sitting room cum reception area of the rectory.

Day 6, Wednesday 15TH May: After a hearty breakfast we set off again back to Craignant, we passed the track we had come down the previous evening and were surprised to see that some of the track had been washed out by the overnight rain. Then over Selattyn Hill (without diversion!), back down alongside the Dyke, down to Careg-y-Big then up over Baker's Hill which, for me, had very happy memories - walks from Oswestry way back in the 1950's - then on to the Old Racecourse with a stop for photographs at the remains of the old grandstand with its sculpture of horses heads (*photo below of Sculpture on Racecourse Common, Oswestry appears courtesy of Jeremy Bolwell at http://s0.geograph.org.uk/geophotos/02/91/49/2914984_af9ff26c.jpg*). The sculpture was ridden by NJR. We walked on through interesting countryside with small villages and with one terrific panorama at Moelydd (285m) with views of snow covered Berwyn Hills and possibly of Snowdonia beyond, 40 miles distant. Then came a disappointment. Despite many signs indicating ice cream for sale, no one was at home when we found the cottage that housed the person who evidently had put up the signs.

Following the path around the edge of Llanyrnech golf course, (memories of Ian Woosnam's heroic golfing deeds), and the quarry, we dropped down to the towpath of the Montgomery Canal, keeping one eye on the beautiful, graceful swans on the canal and the other eye on the flood water to the east, because we knew that our accommodation was off in that direction. We were in the valley of the River Vyrney which flows down through lush meadows to meet up with the River Severn.

We passed the flooded footpath which would have led us to Ty Coch church and after a short section of road walking, and taking photographs of a handsome lama, we thankfully arrived at Mrs. Julie (Peggy) Lee's bungalow with her husband Bill, who is a keen golfer and who knows Ian Woosman well and was pleased to talk about him. Mrs. Lee served a great evening meal of chicken casserole, choice of desserts followed by cheese and biscuits and coffee and chocolate mints. Great stuff – just what we needed.

Day 7, Thursday 16TH May: Breakfast was really nice with a choice of the usual fry-up or kippers. Then we were off again down the road to the mural clad underpass and through the village of Four Crosses with some well maintained, interesting buildings. Later the path crossed a low lying area which was flooded so we had to retrace our steps and retreat to the canal towpath and walk down to Pool Quay where we stopped at the pub to have a welcome drink and a rest. The original plan was to leave the path at Pool Quay and cross the footbridge over the River Severn and find our accommodation at Trewen to the east of the river but there was far too much flood water. So we arranged for Mrs Hamer of Greenbank Bungalow, Trewen, to collect us at Buttington Church. After our refreshments at Pool Quay we rejoined the towpath for a couple of miles and then came a short section along the wide verge of the busy A458 road to Buttington Church, where Mrs Hamer collected us and ferried us back to her comfortable home where we had a choice of pink or white (or was it lime green?) bed sheets!



Day 8, Friday 17TH May: After another excellent breakfast, Mrs Hamer ferried us back to Buttington and bid us farewell. By the bridge over the River Severn we were lucky enough to see a slow-worm, a legless lizard. Although alive, it was barely moving and thus true to its name. After leaving the River Severn we were soon on the uphill path that took us to the summit of Beacon Ring (408 m), an iron age hill fort now planted with beech trees and with two prominent communication masts. Then on into the Leighton Estate with conspicuous notices to "please keep to the footpath to avoid the spread of ash tree die back virus", and with several lovely monkey puzzle trees. After a chat with a lone forestry worker and the viewing of many children's bikes in the garden of the estate lodge, we trudged along the lane into Kingswood then Dyked to Forden and across farmland to the B4368 road where we diverted to the lovely town of Montgomery and found our very comfortable accommodation in the town centre. We met up with Marjorie Ide, a local resident who is a member of the YHA, for a pint in one of the pubs; admired the Montgomery Spar Shop housed in a posh Georgian building in George Street and enjoyed an evening meal in an Indian restaurant, formally a pub, on the outskirts of the town.

Day 9, Saturday 18TH May: Final Day of Walking: Nigel, who had been manfully suffering from blisters on both feet for a few days decided that enough was enough and opted to travel to Clun with Mrs Jones's son who had agreed to transport our luggage. The Stoic Six headed back to ODP along the B4386 to complete the stretch of the path to Newcastle-on-Clun. We had elevenses outside the Bluebell Inn at Brampton Crossroads which retains an ancient, derelict petrol pump. We crossed the River Caebitra, along the Dyke into the grounds of Mellington Hall, bypassed the tea room, (great gnashing of teeth from some members of the party who fancied a cuppa), up over the Kerry Ridgeway, down into Churchtown with its delightful, tiny chapel, where we lunched. Then up another hill to Hergan at 408m, down to 246 m, then up Craig Hill at 369 m where we found an ODP fingerpost telling us that Prestatyn was 88 ½ miles north and Sedbury Cliffs was 88 ½ m south, i.e. we were exactly halfway along the official route. We then descended to the B4368, half a mile east of Newcastle-on-Clun and 3 mile west of the lovely little town of Clun. The 3 mile walk along the B4368 was hardly the highlight of the trek but we made it safely and we put our weary feet up at the White Horse Inn where we met up with Nigel and where we all enjoyed a splendid evening meal, followed but the usual NJR award ceremony which included me being congratulated for declining to sleep in pink sheets at Mrs. Hamer's house!

Day 10, Sunday 18th May: No early reveille that morning, since the walking was over, so a leisurely breakfast was enjoyed. But the excitement was not over! I had asked Jack, the pub landlord, in advance, by email, to arrange for a taxi to take us and our luggage to the Craven Arms railway station to catch our train due to depart at 11.27am. A small mini-bus with 6 seats arrived 10.55am and when the lady driver realised that there were seven of us plus six suitcases, she departed back to the taxi depot and reappeared at 11.10am with a larger mini bus.

Craven Arms is approximately 10 miles as the crow flies from Clun and boy, how the crows, foolish enough to be near the road, flew, as the lady driver tore down the, thankfully, largely deserted, country roads that Sunday morning to deliver us safely at the station, on time. It was bit of a white knuckle ride but we made it and as I said to NJR "by arriving at Craven Arms Station with just 1 minute to spare, that did mean that we did not clutter up the station platform for too long".

We all arrived at Newport railway station at around 1.00pm and went our various ways with, I am sure, very happy memories of great trekking.

The following are photographs of the trip as taken by Nigel.

