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Walking Home

My Family and Other Rambles

Written by Clare Balding

Published by Penguin Books Ltd

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Walking Home

My Family and Other Rambles

CLARE BALDING

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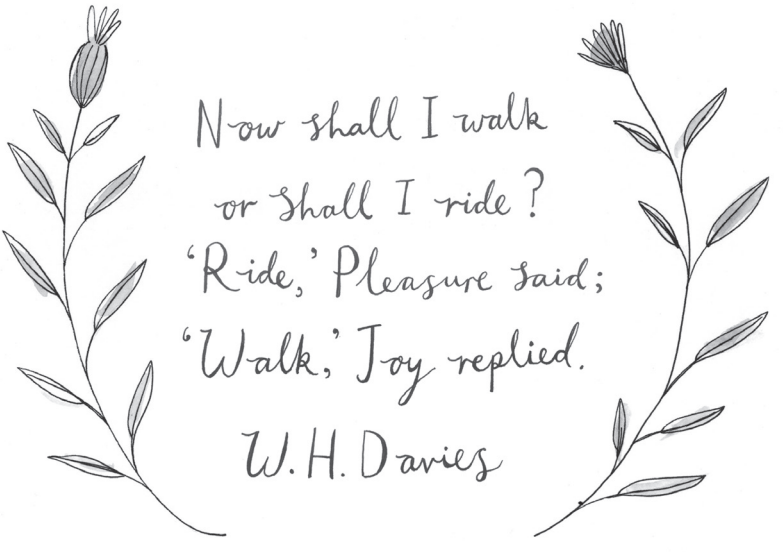
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To Lucy, for Walking

To Mum and Dad, for Home


Now shall I walk
or shall I ride?
'Ride,' Pleasure said;
'Walk,' Joy replied.
W. H. Davies

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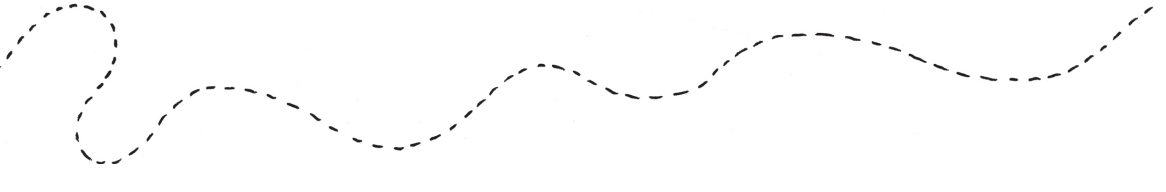
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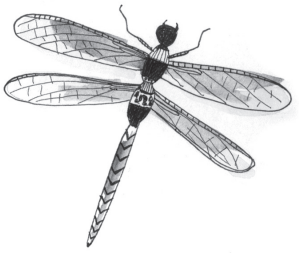
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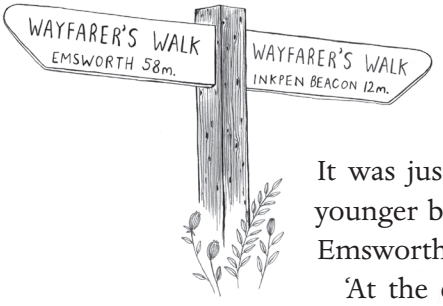


Pre-Ramble

I used to think walking was something you did purely out of necessity. You had to take the dog for a walk or, trapped without a car, you had to walk home.

I spent my childhood at a faster pace. I galloped through the countryside and I galloped through life. I always wanted to rush on to the next thing before I'd finished what I was doing or saying. I was, as they say if they're being kind, 'irrepressible'. Or, if they're not, 'a pain in the arse'.

Up on the Downs above my family home, Kingsclere, there's a sign I would see nearly every day. It read 'Wayfarer's Walk'. The arrow pointing left read 'Emsworth, 58 miles'. The one pointing right read 'Inkpen Beacon, 12 miles'.



I had sometimes wondered what it would be like to walk the whole thing. I never actually planned to do it, of course. It was just an idle thought. Andrew, my younger brother, always asked me where Emsworth was.

'At the end of the Wayfarer's Walk,' I said, while giving him a Chinese burn.

'Or at the beginning,' he hissed, trying to pretend it didn't hurt.

I let go of his arm. He had a point.

'Maybe we should find out,' he said.

I waved my hand airily. 'One day.'

In fact, growing up in a racing yard, I used to know the geography of the UK only by racecourses.

I knew where Alton Towers was because you can see it from Uttoxeter racecourse, which is on the A50, midway between Stoke and Derby. I knew that there were two places called Bangor because a jockey once kept driving over and back across the Menai Bridge into Anglesey, looking urgently for the racecourse, when he should have been walking into the paddock at Bangor on Dee, just south-east of Wrexham.

I could plot my way down the east coast of Scotland and northern England via Perth, Musselburgh, Kelso, Newcastle, Sedgefield and Redcar, but I had no reason to know where Durham was. I could point to Southwell on a map, but I wasn't entirely sure about the location of Lincoln (the racecourse closed in 1965). I knew Great Yarmouth, where the racecourse sits around a caravan park, but I had never even heard of Lowestoft or Aldeburgh, or experienced any of the joys of the Suffolk coast.

I thought it was perfectly normal to have never travelled to Cornwall, because there are no racecourses west of Newton Abbot. A bit like my brother thought the seasons of the year were Flat and

National Hunt, I regarded Newmarket as the capital of the world and Lambourn as a major city of industry.

I didn't have time to just *walk*. I never had time. I was too busy rushing on to the next adventure, jumping the next fence. Then, I wanted to take risks, I wanted an adrenalin rush. I didn't want to walk anywhere, I wanted to gallop. In my family, walking just took too long.

'Why would you walk without a dog or a pitchfork?' my father would ask.

The pitchfork might seem a bit odd to you if you live on the Fulham Road, although I can imagine Dad, four-pronged fork over his shoulder, strolling past the shop that's always got a sale on mirrors and writes the prices all over the front of them. He'd consider them quite good value but then wander on to the shop that designs expensive kitchens.

'Twenty grand for a kitchen? You could buy a bloody nice horse for that. I just don't understand it.'

He'd huff at the insanity and then look for divots in the pavement to repair. That's why he carries a pitchfork, you see. To repair hoof marks in the gallops. It's called 'treading in'. You'll have seen the scene in *Pretty Woman* where they do it at the polo match in short skirts and high heels. My dad does it properly – with a four-pronged pitchfork. Get the prongs in under the divot, lift it up, then tread it level with the grass around it.

'No point doing a job unless you do it properly.' This is the mantra of his life and, consequently, the background music of mine. Dad is a doer, not a thinker.

'You won't catch me sitting like a saddo drinking at lunchtime,' he says, pouring quarter of a bottle of sherry into his Cup-a-Soup. He offers me his mug.

'You should taste this. It's really excellent, you know.'

I turn up my top lip. I hate sherry and I don't want to drink out of Dad's cup. Much as I love him, I have never wanted to share his food and I've never wanted him to share mine either. That bit is harder to prevent. My father sees himself as the official taster to

the world. He will make you a gin and tonic, drop in the ice and a slice, then take a sip of it to 'check it's all right' before handing it to you.

'*Stop drinking my drink!*' I shout at him from the other room, because I know he's doing it without even seeing him. He comes in, looking bemused.

'But I have to check it's good enough for you,' he says before handing it over. 'There. That is the best gin and tonic you . . . will . . . ever . . . have.'

My sister-in-law knew she had gained full acceptance when Dad started eating from her plate without asking permission. He just wanted to check hers tasted as good as his. She nearly stabbed her fork into the back of his hand by mistake, but that's the risk you run if you steal food from under other people's noses, and my father has been a risk-taker all his life. Maybe that's why walking never appealed to him. He couldn't see the risk, or the point.

My mother likes walking, with the dogs or the grandchildren. She takes an old ice-cream container to pick blackberries or mushrooms and checks the hedgerows for hidden gems. She doesn't walk with my father because he can't stroll or forage. He'd be diving off into a field to pull up ragwort, checking on horses, or rushing home to change for a game of golf.

If something awful happens or she needs time to think, Mum will take the dogs for a walk. When our puppy was hit by a car on the road outside our house and died in my arms, my partner, Alice, and I were in that state of shocked grief that you never forget.

We drove him home to Kingsclere, where Mum had organized for a grave to be dug out. After we had buried him – I still feel a catch in my throat at the horror of it all – Mum took us for a walk. We trudged in silence, tears blurring our vision, until Ruby the boxer snuffled up, her back end waggling with joy. We had to smile at her and we had to keep moving, one foot in front of the other, away from the ghastliness of what we had witnessed.

Mum believes, as Hippocrates did, that walking is the best medicine for all ailments, mental and physical. She is a lone walker. I

cannot imagine her joining a group of strangers or going very far out of her territory. The word 'ramblers' makes her come out in a cold sweat.

'They have all that *kit*. Those stupid socks and poles and a map covered in plastic and a compass. Then, when I tell them that they're not on the footpath they get aggressive.'

So I didn't exactly grow up with ambulophobia, but there *was* a degree of ramblerophobia. (I realize this may not be a word – until now.)

This all changed with a single phone call. In 1999 I was contacted by a BBC Radio 4 producer called Lucy Lunt. She had seen me on TV doing an interview with Terry Wogan for *Auntie's Sporting Bloomers* and thought I looked like fun. As I was a 'country sort', she wondered if I might be the right presenter for a new series she was making.

'Do you walk?' Lucy asked.

'Well, I walk the dogs,' I said.

I had moved to London, where my feet were mainly deployed on pavements and tunnels in Tube stations. I did go home to Kingsclere regularly, and when I was there I made sure I always took the dogs out, so I figured that counted. I had no idea there were people who walked for the sake of it, and groups who went out regularly to conquer the footpaths of Great Britain.

I sounded more confident than my experience warranted. But yes, in my understanding of the word, I was a walker.

'Excellent,' she said. 'Now, can you read a map?'

I replied, a little too hastily, 'Of course I can.'

This was in the days before satnavs and GPS, and I had an uncanny knack of memorizing a page from a road atlas so that I didn't have to look at it en route. I failed to realize she was talking about Ordnance Survey maps. A decade and a half later, I will still turn to Lucy as we're about to announce the starting-grid reference

and say, 'Just remind me. Is it along the corridor and up the stairs, or up the stairs and along the corridor?'

'The day you know that is the day you'll probably have to stop,' she'll reply.

Truth be told, I never want to stop. The Radio 4 series Lucy was signing me up for was called *Ramblings*. It's a half-hour programme in which I walk with people all over the country. Lucy was hoping she might have found a format that would last for a few series, maybe even a couple of years, if we were lucky. Fifteen years and forty-five series later, it is still going strong.

Of all the things I work on, of all the programmes I have ever presented, *Ramblings* is my favourite. You might think half an hour on radio of two people (sometimes more) walking around the countryside is an odd concept for a series, but it works.

At a rough estimate, I have covered about fifteen hundred miles of footpaths, for *Ramblings*, or just for myself. I have tackled apocalyptic thunderstorms, struggled with blisters, a bad back, a twisted ankle and the wrong clothes, and traipsed through the snow of the Perthshire mountains with no voice (me, not the mountains – they always speak).

All these miles have changed my perception of the countryside, as well as revolutionizing my knowledge of it. I realize that I spent my childhood looking at a skeleton of Britain in which I knew obscure bones but not about the spine of the Pennine Way, or anything about the capillaries of tiny footpaths that take us deep into the woods and along the riverbanks of our landscape.

I have felt the delights of the North-east Coastal Path, the Highland Way from Milngavie to Fort William, the South-west Coast Path and the South Downs Way. I have bounced on spring dews and crunched on autumn leaves, I have felt the brutal wind bend me like a misshapen hawthorn bush, and I have strolled for miles with the sun warming my cheeks and refracting off chalk and water.

For *Ramblings*, my companions are always interestingly chosen. I have walked with historians, geologists, twitchers, botanists, poets,

artists and adventurers. They usually have boundless knowledge and endless enthusiasm, so I always learn something new. With every step I discover more about the land in which we live.

We usually cover at least seven or eight miles, but sometimes we venture further and are encased in our boots for most of the day. I love the stories that people reveal over those miles. I have told people all sorts of things during the course of a walk, and they have told me things they probably never thought they would open up about.

That's because walking side by side is very different from sitting opposite someone. There is only occasional eye contact, so none of that awkward looking up and away if you think you've caught their eye for too long. You are sharing an experience, looking at a view together, puffing up a hill or watching the waves crash into the rocks below. You face the weather together, and as two or three hours unfold the layers peel back.

It is therapy for the soul. It's as if walking has unlocked a part of my brain the way that riding did when I was a child, and walking with other people gives me a chance to satisfy my inquisitive mind. I can ask all the questions I want to ask, and they, for the most part, seem fairly willing to answer them.

I also try to walk alone as much as possible, or just with Alice. Except we're not quite on our own – we're with Archie, our Tibetan terrier. The other day in a London park I suddenly noticed a tree I had never seen before: it looked like a twisted rope leading up to a shaggy head of hair. I stopped and stared, lost in the moment. Archie sniffed the tree and cocked his leg. He does have a way of bursting your bubble.

Walking slows me down, it gives me time to think, time to explore the land, the seasons, the person and the dog I share my life with, and the beauty in every day.

There is a frequency your brain tunes into after about two hours, as the rhythm of your footfall becomes its only beat. It is like meditation, a means of earthing your body and your mind.

This is the story of the paths I have walked, the people I have

met, how my understanding of our country has changed, and how walking has shaped my life.

I love it, and I need it. Now I make sure that I start every day with an hour-long walk with Archie, and I always look forward to the evening, when I get the chance to walk him again. And whether or not we're recording for radio, I never need an excuse to get out there and discover a new path.

I am at home with my brother, Andrew, and my sister-in-law, banging on about the joys of walking. Abruptly, my brother says, 'You should do the Wayfarer's Walk. We always talked about it, do you remember?'

So I start thinking about it seriously.

I haven't seen that much of Andrew in recent years, so he's less annoying. He falls asleep at the dinner table and he wears terrible shoes but, apart from that, he's OK. He lives at Park House in Kingsclere with his wife, Anna Lisa, and their three children, and he trains about 170 horses, which consumes his life. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if he hadn't wanted to take over the business and train racehorses.

Once he had passed through his phase of calling himself Alan and licking radiators because they tasted of tea, he turned out to be quite creative. He drew things all the time and his artwork is rather good. Where my dad has always been a chart man – neat lines with his all-colour biro, endless lists and signs that he had to write himself because no one else could do it properly – Andrew is more free form. If he hadn't ended up training, I think he would have been an artist or run a gallery.

He's also a bit of a dreamer. So when he said he wanted to walk the Wayfarer's Walk, I didn't really pay any attention. Not for twenty years. Then, suddenly, I decided it was something we *had* to do.

I wanted to share with my family some of the pleasure I had got

from walking all over the country and I had a crazy idea that it might be a fun way to re-create our childhood.

So I say to Andrew, 'Why don't we walk it together?'

Alice and Anna Lisa swap the kind of glance that only those who live with dreamers can understand. It is a look that says 'Here they go again.' They sensibly decide not to dissuade us – they know that will make it more likely we might follow our latest idea.

But I'm serious, and I think Andrew is too. We want to go to Emsworth and walk home from there. It is seventy miles in total from Emsworth to Inkpen Beacon. It will be a great family adventure. Won't it?