

Father, Son and the Pennine Way

The Pennine Way

The Pennine Way was the idea of journalist and Rambler Tom Stephenson, who'd been inspired by similar 'national trails' in the USA. He first floated the idea in the *Daily Herald* in 1935 and the final section of the route was eventually declared open 30 years later – meaning the Pennine Way celebrated its 50th anniversary in April 2015.

It now runs from Edale, in the North Derbyshire Peak District, through the Yorkshire Dales and the Northumberland National Park and ends 267 miles later at Kirk Yetholm, just over the Scottish border.

It's not the longest of the UK's national trails, but – according to the Ramblers' Association, who should know about these things – it's 'one of the country's toughest.' In February 2016 I *didn't* know that...

Prologue

If you're a serious walker with years of experience, a well-worn back pack and a healthy collection of knee supports, it's probably best if you don't read this book.

You'll scoff and shake your head at my lack of preparation: you'll point out that I didn't take the right clothing or the right equipment.

You'll say I wasn't prepared: that I hadn't done my homework.

And you'd be right.

But I wasn't a serious walker. I wasn't even a walker.

I was a Dad – and a writer. Someone who spent his working life bent over a keyboard: but someone who wanted a physical challenge before he was too old for a physical challenge.

Above all though, I was a Dad who wanted to spend some time with his son while he wanted to spend some time with me: some precious father/son time before he went to university and things were never the same again.

When I asked Alex if he wanted to come with me, the furthest I'd walked was four miles – on a sunny afternoon with the dog.

So no, I wasn't prepared and I hadn't done my homework. In the same way that people say they climbed Everest 'because it was there,' I asked Alex to come on the Pennine Way because I'd heard of it. And five days and 80 miles sounded about right

for a physical challenge: and it sounded about as much time as a 17 year old boy would want to spend with his Dad in the summer holidays.

This isn't a guide book, it's a story - about the challenges we faced and the experiences we shared. It's a buddy movie where the buddy was my son. It's a road trip on foot. It's what we discovered about each other – and about ourselves.

And for some of you – maybe with a small child asleep next to you – I hope that one day it will also be an inspiration.

Chapter 1 – The Request

A Sunday afternoon at the end of February. *Alex*, I texted, *can you come downstairs? I want to ask you a question.*

Why am I doing this? He's 17: he's not going to say 'yes.' And what the hell am I going to do if he does say 'yes?' How will I get out of it?

What I'm going to suggest to my son is ludicrous. So far outside my comfort zone that it's out of sight. So far beyond anything I've ever done in my life that, bluntly, I've no real idea of *what* I'm suggesting. But I've sent the text – and here he is.

"What is it?"

"I've a question to ask you..."

"I know. I read the text."

"Do you want to come for a walk with me?"

"With the dog? I'm busy..."

"No. Further than that. The Pennine Way. 5 days. 80 miles. In the summer holidays."

There, I've said it. Ah well, it was a nice idea.

Yeah, right, Dad. Like you could walk 80 miles.

I'm going to get a summer job. I'll be working all the time.

Five days? Just the two of us? I'm not sure that'll work, Dad.

There are a thousand reasons why he'll say no.

Alex looks at me. He shrugs. "Sure," he says. "Why not?"

"Why?" my wife asks. She's been silent so far. The voice of reason and logic. I hadn't told her what I was planning. She'll talk me out of it.

“Because I want a physical challenge. I want to test myself. Do something I’ve never done before. And I need to do it before my left knee decides the only thing it’s good for is a waiting list. And I want to spend some time with my son...”

As I say, the voice of reason and logic.

Don’t be ridiculous. All you do is walk the dog on the cliff top. Preferably on a sunny day. You’re a writer. You spend your days slumped over a keyboard. You eat too much cheese. Drink too much wine.

“It’s a brilliant idea,” she says.

Three words from my son: four from my wife. That’s all it took.

“Are you sure?” I ask Alex.

He sighs and looks at me. Old age. Everything needs repeating these days. “Sure. I like walking with you.” He pauses – and turns to what’s *really* important. “What time’s dinner?”

“Six,” I say. And he disappears back to his bedroom, leaving me stunned. And committed – to five days on the Pennine Way.

The plan was to start in Malham, just north of Skipton, and finish in Dufton – 13 miles from Carlisle. But at that moment the words ‘Malham,’ ‘Dufton’ and ‘Pennine Way’ were just that – words. Mordor, Narnia and the Forbidden Forest were more real to me.

I didn’t even know where the idea had come from.

“Dad?” Alex was back. And with a serious question.

“Where are we going to sleep?”

“In B&Bs. Bed and breakfasts. Tents have never been one of my strong points.”

“Will we have separate rooms?” And there it was, the deal-breaker. No self-respecting 17 year old would share a room with his Dad for five days. No chance.

“I don’t think we can. Not if we’re staying in B&Bs. Two rooms would be too expensive. Sharing a room is the price you pay for a full English every morning.”

“OK, that’s fine.” And he went back upstairs.

Leaving his Dad to go online and look at pictures of hills. And more hills...

Chapter 2 – Why?

A day later I was walking along the beach. It was lunchtime: bananas, an apple and mineral water were waiting back in the office. Satan – otherwise known as a cheese and tomato sandwich, packet of crisps and a Coke – was firmly behind me. Unlike the wind, which was firmly in my face. And straight off the North Sea.

I was worrying. After Alex had gone back to his bedroom I'd read the website of someone who knew what he was talking about. 'You can expect to go at 2mph on the Pennine Way.'

So 16 miles a day meant eight hours of walking. A whole new meaning for 9-to-5. I gritted my teeth, pulled my coat around me and marched resolutely along the beach.

Thirty minutes later I was back at my desk, I didn't 'slump over the keyboard.' Instead I drank my water, ate the fruit as slowly as possible and asked myself some questions.

Why was I doing this?

The answer I'd given my wife – "I want to do a physical challenge before my left knee decides the only thing it's good for is a waiting list" – was a nice soundbite. But it doesn't tell the full story. Yes, I wanted a physical challenge: yes, I was undoubtedly getting older and yes, I wanted to test myself. But it went deeper than that.

I wanted to prove something to myself: I wanted to prove I was alive.

Ten years ago – completely out of the blue – I was critically ill. I spent four days in intensive care. At one point the phrase 'touch and go' was being used. In my time I'd run half-marathons: when I came out of hospital I couldn't walk up the street.

The first target I set myself was simple: walk to the lamppost nearest our house. I've just done it now – it's exactly 200 steps, not quite 200 yards.

But on a Tuesday morning in April 2006 I couldn't do it.

My eldest son, Dan, had come with me. He was 12 at the time. "Can you take me home?" I'd said to him. "I can't do it. Help me get back to the house." In retrospect, not something a 12 year old should have experienced.

That moment – the moment I looked up and saw the lamppost and realised I couldn't reach it – has haunted me for ten years. 80 miles in five days seemed a reasonable way of laying the ghost to rest.

Was I physically fit enough?

Right there and then the answer was 'no.' My wife was right. Thanks to wine and cheese and the fruit of the bacon sandwich tree I was overweight. An hour with the dog was my limit. Now I was proposing to walk 8 hours a day for five consecutive days?

Yes, I'd lost some weight since Beverley gave me a Fitbit for Christmas. But two-thirds of my clothes were still out of bounds when I opened the wardrobe door.

And what about my knee? Last time I'd walked up the cliff from the beach it had stopped working. *Sorry, mate. I'm getting old. I'm having five minutes off.* And my right hamstring: 11 or 12 years since I foolishly challenged my daughter to a race and had to be helped back to the car by two old ladies. I still felt the twinges. Even if the spirit was willing, plenty of the flesh was decidedly weak.

Why the Pennine Way?

Because I'd heard of it. Maybe I'd seen it on *Countryfile*. I honestly don't know. It was the only walk I'd heard of and – when I looked – there was plenty of information on Google.

In retrospect we could have done 80 miles on the Coast to Coast walk and finished Robin Hood's Bay. My wife would only have had to drive 15 miles to collect us instead of 115. She hasn't worked that out yet: keep it to yourself will you?

How much did I know about walking?

If you're remarkably old you'll have heard of Len Shackleton, the 'Clown Prince of Football.' Len played for Newcastle and Sunderland just after the Second World War. In his autobiography he had a chapter called 'The Average Director's Knowledge of Football.' It consisted of a single blank page.

I was tempted to follow suit: My Knowledge of Walking on February 28th.

Maybe I was ahead of Len's average director – but only just. I'd passed plenty of serious walkers when I'd been out with the dog. I knew they had boots and backpacks and serious expressions. A lot of them seemed to be held together with support bandages. But that was it. Oh, and I'd once taken a girlfriend to the Lake District for the weekend. But definitely not for the walking.

And what about Alex?

Bluntly, would we still be friends at the end of five days? Some of my happiest moments as a Dad have been walking the dog with Alex. We'd wander through the woods, talking about life, politics, growing-up, school, friends, philosophy, the character defects of his teachers... We discussed serious questions: did God exist? (No.) Was space infinite? (Too ridiculous to contemplate.)

We talked about the future; about careers; about what sort of father he'd be one day.

We talked about his relationships with girls...

No, we didn't. Don't be ridiculous. However close you are to your son, at 17 some things are *way* off limits

But my relationship with Alex was infinitely precious to me. Taking a risk with my health was one thing: risking my relationship with my son was entirely different.

Chapter 3 – The Gory Details

Sod it.

Enough of the ‘nowhere near fit enough’ and ‘slightly overweight’ nonsense.

You want the truth; the gory details. And there’s no point writing this book if I’m not honest.

So time for Tubby Lardpants to ‘fess up...

On December 5th I’d opened a new file in Evernote. It was called ‘sort myself out.’ And I weighed 105.4kg. If you’re in the UK and you still work in old money that’s 16st 8lbs. If you’re in the US, it’s 232lbs. I won’t tell you what my body fat percentage was – you might be eating your breakfast.

By Christmas Day Lardpants was down to 102.8kg. At which point my wife gave me a Fitbit. It’s no understatement to say that it changed my life.

The Fitbit’s demands were simple. Walk 10,000 steps a day.

‘What?’ I thought at the time. ‘How in God’s name do you walk 10,000 steps a day?’ Stories filtered through to me of a doctor friend who was doing 17,000 steps a day – apparently by pacing the hospital corridors in between screwing people back together. My first day with the Fitbit had produced 3,874 steps. 17,000? I dismissed it as the stuff of fantasy: something only a hollow-cheeked fanatic could achieve.

But gradually I made a few changes. I applied the law of marginal gains. It had worked for British cycling: why couldn’t it work for me? So I parked at the far end of the car park. Made a couple of detours on the way to the office. Stopped walking to the sandwich shop at lunchtime and walked along the beach inside.

And one day it happened. I was walking past Scarborough’s Art Gallery and my Fitbit suddenly buzzing and vibrating. A small orgasm was taking place on my left wrist. Wowzer! 10,000 steps. Next stop the hospital corridor...

By the time Alex said ‘yes’ I was 96.5kg (15st 3lbs or 213lbs) – and managing my 10,000 steps four or five days a week.

But I wasn’t a walker. I’d lost 19lbs by the simple method of missing lunch and going for a walk instead. I was walking in a pair of jeans and trainers, doing maybe 1½ miles on the beach.

And with 16 weeks to go, ‘nowhere neat fit enough still applied.’ But walking was my only option. See above: left knee, right hamstring – running was out of the question.

And I definitely didn't want to join the legions of middle aged men who slipped erotically into some Lycra, forgot to look in the mirror and then clambered on to a bike.

But I was beginning to realise that Scarborough beach – beautiful as it was in the spring sunshine – bore little resemblance to Pen y Ghent and Great Shunner Fell. Strolling along the beach fantasising about summer and wearing my shorts might be working for my waistline: it wasn't preparing me for the Pennine Way.

The choice was simple: do some serious training or have another – rather more painful – conversation with my son. Maybe I needed to do some reconnaissance: see exactly what I'd let myself in for. After all, we had a wedding anniversary to celebrate...

I finished my walk, ate my banana and Googled 'Best B&B in the Dales.' It was time to meet the enemy face-to-face...