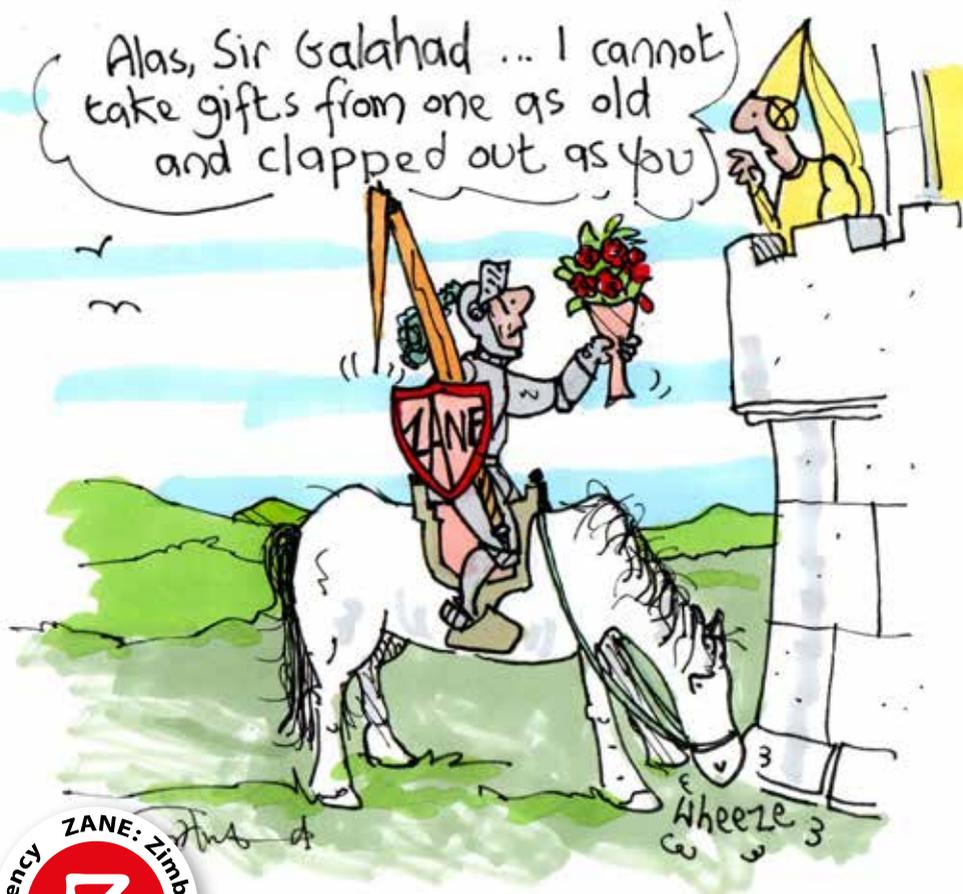


The Clapped-out Old Galahad

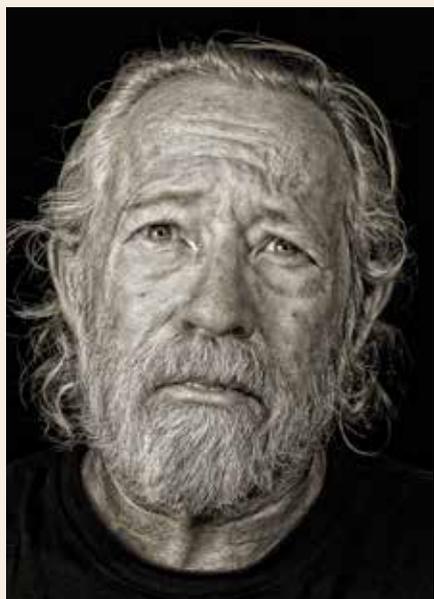
Tom Benyon OBE



Reg Charity No 1112949

ZANE: Zimbabwe A National Emergency

14 circular walks in Oxfordshire & Gloucestershire, 2020



Dear Reader

Hunger Stalks the Poor

Together with our dog, Moses, Jane and I have completed our eleventh ZANE walk.

Why did we walk yet again? Simple: to draw attention to the ghastly plight of Zimbabwe's impoverished people.

As the rest of the world focuses on Covid-19, ZANE workers tell me that the virus is the least of their worries for a country racked by deadly famine.

With inflation of over 750 per cent and rising, the Zimbabwean government maintains its message of "no crisis". Meanwhile, ZANE is receiving desperate calls to assist pensioners dying of hunger, the reality of Zimbabwe in 2020. Pensioners who six months ago were barely surviving can no longer afford their medical insurance contributions. This is leading to a growing medical emergency, which ZANE is struggling to contain.

That is why Jane and I were determined to walk 143 miles throughout Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. Over a period of 15 days, we covered up to 10 miles each day. We walked for former farmers, teachers, lecturers, engineers, nurses, architects, charity workers, book-keepers and past community leaders, all today reduced to begging for food and medicines.

We walked for ZANE because it could so easily be us - and it could so easily be you. We walked because your generosity enables ZANE's loyal workers to provide food, medicine and comfort to those in great need. We walked to let them know you haven't forgotten them.

I hope you enjoy reading this walk commentary, which once again includes contributions from both Jane and me. If you have already sponsored ZANE, thank you very much. Your donation is already assisting those who need it most. If you haven't, please do so.

There but for the Grace of God go we all.

Best wishes



Tom and Jane Benyon

PS: Please note that the printing and distribution costs of this commentary are covered many times over by supporter sponsorship.



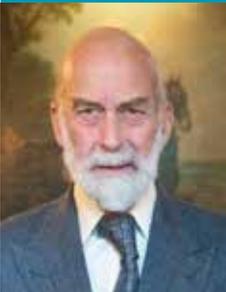
ZANE does fantastic work looking after vulnerable people in Zimbabwe and showing servicemen and women that they are not forgotten. They are professional, passionate and scrupulous about how the money is spent.

HMA Melanie Robinson
UK Ambassador to Zimbabwe
Former Executive Director
of the World Bank



I have seen a little bit of ZANE's work on the ground and from what I have seen, it is very, very impressive . . . ZANE is one of those lovely organisations that make a little bit of money go a long, long way. ZANE is a good cause and the money is properly and well spent.

John Simpson CBE
World Affairs Editor of the BBC



I have supported ZANE for many years as they do excellent work amongst the vulnerable in Zimbabwe.

HRH Prince Michael of Kent ccvo

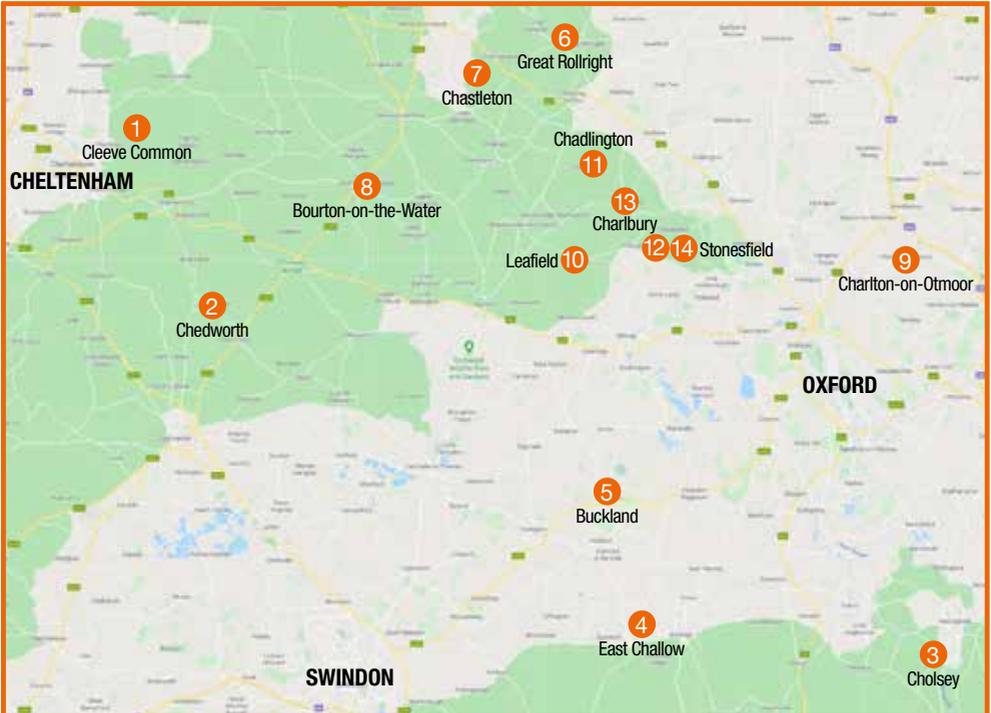


I am deeply impressed with the work of ZANE; one of those charities that make a little money go a long way.

Baroness Royall of Blaisdon
Former Labour leader of
the House of Lords

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ZANE Walk 2020 7 to 21 September 2020

Date

Start & Finish Points

Date

Start & Finish Points

- 1 Monday 7th Cleeve Common
- 2 Tuesday 8th Chedworth
- 3 Wednesday 9th Cholesey
- 4 Thursday 10th East Challow
- 5 Friday 11th Buckland
- 6 Saturday 12th Great Rollright
- Sunday 13th REST DAY

- 7 Monday 14th Chastleton
- 8 Tuesday 15th Bourton-on-the-Water
- 9 Wednesday 16th Charlton-on-Otmoor
- 10 Thursday 17th Leaffield
- 11 Friday 18th Chadlington
- 12 Saturday 19th Stonesfield
- 13 Sunday 20th Charlbury
- 14 Monday 21st Stonesfield

Here We Go Again

6 September — The Day Before

Jane and I are all set for our “circular” walk. It’s sad that driver Markus won’t be here – but since we’ll be sleeping in our own beds at home this year, we can’t justify his presence. He will be much missed.

As ever, we are walking for Zimbabwe’s poor. This is the eleventh year I’ve said that the state of Zimbabwe couldn’t possibly get any worse – and lo and behold, once again it is! The future looks grim. Through government incompetence and gross corruption, Zimbabwe’s inflation is soaring above 750 per cent. It’s not as if we haven’t been here before. It’s often said that the first sign of madness is doing the same stupid thing time after time, hoping to get a different result. The Zimbabwe government is proving how true this bleak proposition is.

A friend asked me a couple of dynamite questions. The first was this: why is it that Singapore, a country founded more or less at the same time as Zimbabwe, yet possessing none of its natural advantages – such as tourism or agricultural potential, or mineral riches – is today one of the richest nations on Earth? It’s a country that can afford to provide superb facilities of health, education and social

services to its people, yet Zimbabwe is a world-class economic ruin, the bulk of its people reduced to beggary.

And the next question was this: why did no media outlet dare to comment when Zimbabwe turned into one of the most racist countries on Earth? From 1999, some 4,000 farmers were ripped from their farms wholly because of the colour of their skin. That was the finding some years ago of black judges in the South African court in Namibia – the findings in Mike Campbell’s case. This ruling has never been challenged. Why the media silence?

Lockdown

Now to the present circumstances...

It’s been fine for Jane and me for we live in a nice house, we have a close family and we’ve been married forever. We are aware that all this is diamond-rare.

We are living in extraordinary times and the country is racking up vast bills. Do you recall the 2010 Conservative election slogan, “Dad’s nose. Mum’s eyes. Gordon Brown’s debt”? Our grandchildren will have to pay our vast Covid debts. Will ZANE survive when, as we all know, “charity starts at home”?

Back to the walk: new Meindl boots, new sunglasses. We are as fit as can be, considering we should be exhibits on the *Antiques Roadshow*. But for many, ZANE is their only hope of survival. There's no NHS or social services in Zimbabwe, and unemployment is 95 per cent. The majority of the most able of the young have long since left, leaving the less able and elderly behind.

So we walk: looking after the poor is what ZANE is all about.

Health Warning

Many of my blog items are typed late in the evening when I am tired and often out of sorts. I try and concentrate on the five subjects that are of most interest to me: sex, money, religion, politics and death. Occasionally, I stray off these topics. Of course, I can only guess as to the political complexion of ZANE's supporters so I have to take some care. I spent most of my political life thinking I was centre left: today, perhaps the tide has shifted leaving me more or less beached on the centre right.

You may not agree with my views, and that's fine, for the hallmark of a free country is the right to disagree and even to give offence. But please go on reading. I try not to "do" party politics but sometimes I

can't resist the odd snide comment. However, I've been as critical of the Conservatives in recent years as of any other party!

My thanks go to various "influencers" who have helped shape my thoughts in this commentary, namely UA Fanthorpe, Rory Sutherland, Richard Holloway, Miles Morland, Tim Binder, Professor Rev'd Nigel Biggar and Douglas Murray.

My thanks also to those who have given me helpful suggestions, including various ZANE trustees and Brigadier Clendon Daukes. My great thanks to Tom van Aurich, our designer, and Tony Husband, our cartoonist.

Further, thank you to the ZANE team and particularly Sue Carter who does so much detailed work.

Please also appreciate that the views in this commentary are mine and mine alone. They don't represent the views of anyone who works for ZANE or the body of the trustees.

Further, this commentary is not a self-important indulgence on my part but – to my surprise – generates far more revenue than the cost of printing and dispatch.

So, if you have already sponsored us, "thank you". And if not, please do so!

The Clapped-out Old Galahad

7 September — Day 1: Cleeve Common

“If you have been to San Francisco, you will know what hills are like...”

That just about sums up today’s walk – and if I can walk up those hills, I can still walk up anything!

On the last walk from Canterbury – it seems like another era – we started off by walking 4 miles in the wrong direction. I waited for Jane’s cry of “Oh bugga,” but thankfully today, we did not have to retrace our steps (much!)

One joy was that our younger daughter, Milly, and her husband, Clay, joined us; they are always a delight and the miles melted with the laughter.

Canon David MacInnes joined us for lunch. Afterwards, Milly said what a lovely man he was, and I agreed and told her that he’s a close friend. She thought for a nanosecond: “What does he see in you to be a close friend?”

Good to have candid children...

Generally Remarkable

Wife General Jane has done a remarkable job in remodelling the food bank she co-founded with me in Oxford in 2007 (CEF: Community Emergency Foodbank). CEF feeds over 3,000 needy people each year.

Up until before the start of the Covid-19 crisis, food bank clients



came to a church in Oxford to collect their food parcels, on Tuesdays and Fridays.

We were obliged to make changes to these arrangements to ensure that volunteers no longer met claimants face to face. So CEF is now a sort of ad hoc Ocado operation: while the Covid emergency lasts, the food – donated by churches and kindly people – is delivered straight to the doors of the needy.

It's been a stressful time. Most of the clients are nice people caught up in hard times, but every now and again there's a wild card. We recently had to stop one woman snitching the bog rolls from the church loo! She was totally unrepentant and not in the least perturbed when we insisted on removing the stolen goods from her bag – she just shrugged and walked away.

“... like some clapped-out old Galahad.”

The Clapped-Out Old Galahad

Jane has a Presbyterian streak. When I buy her flowers, she claims I am in fact buying them for myself as a means of seeking attention. She pins me with a laser eye and asks, “What have you done now?” She knows me rather too well.

And she loathes being patronised.

I told her that I worried about her overworking – I would act as her driver and make sure she was safe. She stared at me and her eyes went dark.

“Back off, Tom,” she snapped. “I am perfectly capable of looking after myself. I don't need you trying to protect me like some clapped-out old Galahad.”

I was searching for a title for this blog and now I have it: “The Clapped-out Old Galahad”.

Perfect!

History and Hindsight

Mankind is condemned to live life forwards and then to view it backwards. I despair at the ignorance of some of those protesting against our history today. These simpletons want to condemn national heroes – take for example US presidents Washington, Jefferson and Madison – based on one aspect of their actions, namely they owned slaves. Yet these are some of the most talented and influential men in modern history. And back at home in the UK, when people lazily denounce





Churchill as a “racist”, they should reflect on the racist views of the man he managed to defeat in the Second World War!

These protestors are deluded in believing they are morally superior to our ancestors. They do not realise the truth of Isaac Newton’s words in 1675: “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” The issue of the wickedness of slavery was not seen in focus until the end of the eighteenth century. After the courageous campaigning of a growing number of Christians, the monstrous cruelty of the trade slowly became clear and then unacceptable.

When our grandchildren look back at our generation, I wonder how they will view our blindness to some of the grave injustices that exist

today? What about the exploitation of near slave labour in the Third World to service our desire for cheap, affordable goods and clothes, for example? Why are people in the financial sectors paid many multiples more than nurses and teachers? And why do we tolerate loneliness in our society, or the sale of alcohol? Take your pick....

Monumental Damage

Philosopher John Locke – said to have invented modern society – claimed that our sense of national self was an accumulation of our previous thoughts and actions: “In this alone consists personal identity”. Nations are shaped by what they have done and how they have suffered, and a nation’s story often takes physical form in memorials.



The smashing madness is out of control in the USA. A statue of Ulysses S Grant, the Union general who won the war to free slaves, was toppled, as was the statue of Hans Christian Heg, who led an anti-slave militia. The Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Regiment Memorial was also badly damaged: bear in mind that Shaw, an abolitionist, commanded the first all-black regiment and fought for his men to have equal pay to that of white troops. And then a statue of Miguel Cervantes, the author of *Don Quixote* and himself a former slave, was mindlessly vandalised!

A nation that forgets its past is like a person with Alzheimer's – helpless and lost.

If I say “France”, an idea comes to you of probably the Eiffel Tower or Notre Dame – whatever the image is, the chances are it's a building that has been around for a while. Tourists visit temples and monuments to get a feel of the country they are in.

To conservatives, the nation is made up of a shared inheritance that each successive generation should care for in turn. To the stone smashers, this is superstition.

Tens of thousands of Africans and Caribbeans came to fight with us in the First and Second World Wars, and the Cenotaph reminds us of that. The smashers think it's a reminder of the hated past.

Society Life

Who do today's young look up to as their role models? Politicians? Really! Sports idols? The media? The stage? Successful businessmen? What a joke.

Families are the bedrock of society. Don't our politicians notice what's going on out there – and if not, why not?

National divorce statistics indicate that there is a divorce every eight minutes, and then a child loses his or her home. That adds up to 180 children a day. Further, there are 280,000 homeless people in England, a rise of 23,000 since 2016.

Some 92,000 children “sofa surf”, that is they move from house to house with their possessions stuffed in plastic bags.

The Marriage Foundation tells us that there’s a tsunami of misery sweeping through the courts. Children from broken marriages are all too often regarded as footballs to be kicked between competing partners.

Boris claims that the Tories want to set up a unit to eradicate homelessness, and Michael Gove wants to save children failed by the system. Bully for them! I am pleased the government “cares”.

I saw a remarkable TV show in which four young men appeared to have out-Romeoed Romeo by breeding 87 children from 32 different women.

They moved in with a new partner for a while, then abandoned the family and zoomed off like a randy bumblebee to pollinate the next flower – and then the next.

The presenter listed the industrial-scale family wreckage: children growing up without a father figure are five times more likely to commit suicide, 32 times more likely to run away from home, 25 times more likely to have behavioural problems, 14 times more likely be sexually aggressive towards others and 10 times more likely to be involved with drug abuse.

When confronted with the facts, the fathers shrugged. Who cares? The taxpayers will pick up the bill.

“Who do today’s young look up to as their role models? Politicians? Really!”

My Thoughts Exactly

8 September — Day 2: Chedworth

We were met by a charming group of ZANE supporters who cheered up our day – and it certainly needed cheering up with the discovery that “we” had left the walking satnav, our lifeline, behind. It consists of a little man on a screen who leaps about indicating which way to turn. Without him, we are “babes in the wood” and more or less lost.

I say “we” left the satnav to be gallant – though, actually, it was wholly the fault of General Jane. But of course, when it comes to apportioning blame, a lack of generosity is simply not in my nature!

A Welcome Guest

The absent satnav made me realise how much we miss driver Markus. He would have gone to pick it up, but because of Covid, he sits disconsolate in Bulawayo.

Thankfully, though, our arrow prayer was answered. One of our guests turned out to be a retired land agent whose responsibilities covered much of the land we were walking on. He has an unerring instinct – wholly alien to me – of knowing which track to take and which to ignore. He is a living manifestation of the army’s flawed officer selection procedures: he failed and I was accepted. Need I say more?



The scenery was the best the Cotswolds can provide – gently hilly with beautifully kept woods. Fields of pampered cattle dreamed flatulently in the sun and classy horses grazed as sleek as seals. The gardens of the manor houses in these parts are manicured to screaming point. As a rare treat, we were able to snatch the occasional glimpse of his-and-hers Mercs squatting aggressively behind wrought-iron gates, all carefully designed to keep sweaty scruffs like us out. It made me wonder what God would love to do if he had had the money!

A Mother Loved

My delightful daughter-in-law Lois rang to ask how the walk was progressing? She is the French mother of our three gorgeous granddaughters, Amelie, Annabel and Eliza.

These girls are lucky – the best gift a man can give his children is to love their mother; and knowing our younger son, that's secured and in place. But it's a troubled world and danger prowls around like a roaring lion.

Recently, the three girls came to stay while I was reading Lily Allen's book, *My Thoughts Exactly*. No, I had never heard of Allen either – but Miles Morland told me about her, and she's a darn good singer, aged 34 or so (and good looking too! But what can I do about that these days...).

I have never believed the contemporary nonsense that claims young men and women are usually the same in terms of sensitivity and vulnerability. I think that, in general, boys/men are the more aggressive and predatory sex and that girls/women are gentler and should be honoured and cherished. And sex shouldn't be downgraded so it's no more important than having a pizza.

Don't You Love Me?

Anyway, I read Allen's book and something clicked into place. Much of her book is too salty to quote directly in a family blog but the essence of her message is that although Harvey Weinstein may be on the extreme edge of sexual predators, he's by no means the only problem. There are a vast number of men out there in their thirties,

forties and fifties who are lethal to women aged between 17 and 25 or so. These girls want to be thought of as desirable and pretty, and they want

to be loved. The vast majority are floating on a sea of promiscuity with no moral guidance worth a damn, and they're hugely vulnerable. And to many in their peer group, saying "no" is a joke.

Many parents lose control of their children in their late teens – if they ever had any – and weakly believe that, as the old song claims, "Everyone's doing it, doing it... so anything goes", and if we try to spoil

"I don't think little Emily is having much fun at all."



little Emily's "fun", we may lose her altogether. But, from what Allen writes, I don't think little Emily is having much "fun" at all.

To quote Allen, who writes from her own experience: "Many of these young women have very low self-worth, they claim to have few sexual hang-ups, but they crave security... They cry to older men, 'Don't you think I'm pretty? Don't you love me? Don't you want to marry me now? Can't you be the one I hitch my wagon to, as you are here, and so am I, and I need to be loved?'"

Allen goes on: "Often, if a guy fancied me, that was enough for both of us. My self-worth was so low, being fancied translated to being wanted – and thus loved – and this felt intoxicating enough for me to agree to sex. I used to want to shout: 'You can be the one to look after me.' That's what I did with all the men I dated. I was confused at the beginning of my sexual life about my own desire for other people. I now know that a man wanting to have sex with you is not the same as him wanting you. He'll have sex with you even if he doesn't want you, just because he can.

“These men are in their thirties and forties: they are older and vastly experienced and they know exactly what they are doing. They will take you to bed just for a laugh, just because they can. Some genuinely want intimacy and to connect with you, but some don’t. They want sex if they fancy you and they want sex even if they don’t, just to prove they can. Some like humiliating you as a turn-on. Some even like you resisting because knocking down the wall you have put up is a turn-on for them.

“I gave myself away but men also ‘helped themselves to me’ and took from me (yes, I’m talking about having sex with me) when they knew, or should have known, that I was too young and inexperienced, too naïve and too pliant to say ‘no’. I know a great many women know what I am talking about. It happens all the time. It’s not rape and it’s not quite assault, but it’s not right and it shouldn’t happen.”

And I pray not to my granddaughters either.

Rhodes Must Fall

There are cries to have the Cecil Rhodes statue removed from Oriel College on the grounds that he was a “genocidal racist”.

The protestors may be puzzled to learn, however, that at Rhodes’ funeral in 1902, the hills were lined with thousands of Ndebele tribesmen chanting, “Our Father is dead”. And perplexity will mount further with the news that three weeks after his funeral, the Ndebele chiefs agreed to guard Rhodes’ grave – and they did so for decades afterwards.

The reason for this was that during the bloody revolt of the Ndebele against the South Africa Company in 1896, Rhodes – unarmed – entered rebel territory to parley.

Sitting amongst the rebels, he came to appreciate their grievances and he promised reform, which led to the leading chief calling

him “Peacemaker”. In fulfilment of his promise, Rhodes bought back from British settlers 100,000 acres of prime farming land and gave it to the Ndebele. Later that year, he resolved to make the building of trust between whites and blacks a major part of his work.

In his will, Rhodes donated the totality of his fortune to fund scholarships for the young, irrespective of race or colour.

Perhaps we might persuade some of the Ndebele tribesmen to come to Oxford and guard Rhodes’ statue!

“And I pray not to my granddaughters either.”

Be Careful What You Wish For

9 September — Day 3: Cholsey

After a patchy night, we got up early to a “dingo’s breakfast” – a fart and a look around. We hooked up with another excellent chatty group of ZANE supporters, though one prospective walker got himself hopelessly lost and spent the day playing hide-and-seek trying to find us.

Many of the Wallingford shops have closed, all victims of the pandemic. I doubt whether the little shops can survive the lockdown – and I wonder when the elderly will get over their nervousness and start to live once again? One thing the government has succeeded in doing really well is planting fear in the hearts of so many lonely people.

Toad Hall

Our little group marched along the riverbank where the great Kenneth Grahame set *The Wind in the Willows*. We fully expected to see Mole and Ratty at any moment, rowing past with their wonderful picnic, and at least half a dozen of the homes we passed could have belonged to the great Toad!

Mile after mile of flatlands stretched before us. As ever, we charged down a path for some considerable distance, only to discover that our satnav anchorman had gone mad and we had to retrace our steps.

First love

It was a shock yesterday to see a face in the street that reminded me of the first woman I ever loved. To be honest, she didn’t really resemble her at all – maybe just the faintest of likenesses – but something stirred my memory and the decades just melted away.



Maurice Chevalier in *Gigi* understated things when he sang, “Ah yes, I remember it well.” For such is the intensity of youth, I recall my first relationship not just “well” but in excruciating detail: it’s still emblazoned in my mind’s eye, and even today the relationship seems to have endured as long as youth itself. Now and then the past makes a pass at me, and I am sent tumbling back through the decades.

She was the daughter of a general, I’ll call her Mary. We met at a party when I was on leave from Sandhurst. She wasn’t pretty in the traditional sense but I thought she was vastly attractive. I was instantly smitten and the next two years were churned into emotional turmoil. The Italians have a phrase (the Italians would), *colpo di fulmine* – which translates as “love that strikes like a bolt of lightning”.

This was over a half a century ago, mind: I was an innocent as most of us were – my contemporaries who pretended otherwise were mostly lying. That the past is a foreign country and they do things differently there is, of course, true: those distant times are summed up by the poet Larkin:

*Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty three
(which was rather late for me)
Between the end of the
“Chatterley” ban
And the Beatles’ first LP.*

Game Over

Anyway we went out, we kissed, we wrote, we kissed, I phoned. Don’t forget the huge change made by mobile phones – in those long-ago days, I had to ring her parents who lived in some style near Perth to ask whether I could speak to my love? Her immediate family knew I was on the chase, but today, because of mobiles, affairs can be conducted without family knowing anything about it. I am yet to be convinced, as far as first love is concerned anyway, that this particular communication revolution is necessarily an improvement.

**“Now and then
the past makes a
pass at me ...”**

Very soon, I told Mary I loved her; then after some reflection she, to my overwhelming joy, told me she loved me too.

Then a problem... I was posted for a year to Kenya, then to the Sultan of Muscat’s armed forces. I wrote, Mary answered – indeed I wrote lots for there was no romance in Arabia other than camels. I was aware there were irritating pauses before she replied, but then, after a year – it seemed an eternity – I was on leave.

Then the car crash. At first, to my distress, Mary seemed reluctant to meet me; then when she was cornered, to my stupefaction she stuttered she was pregnant, the father being some low-life show jumper. I was profoundly shocked and I remember thinking that if I chose not to believe, the whole

thing might vanish like some hideous dream. But, as Mary was demonstrably pregnant, her family insisted she marry the swine. And so she did, in Edinburgh Castle chapel as I recall. I remember weeping bitterly, my happiness terminated. Then I thought I would emulate Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, and beat wildly on the windows of the chapel, screaming to disrupt the ghastly and mistaken proceedings, and elope with Mary. But a tiny trickle of common sense just about percolated through my emotional fog: the fact she was pregnant persuaded me that it had to be “Benyon: game over”.

Tormented, I wondered why cruel fate had dealt me such a foul hand? I felt sure that if there was a God in heaven, he would have prevented

such misery. And then slowly – oh so slowly, and bit by bit – I realised some essential truths. While for me the relationship had been an obsessive passion, for Mary it had been a flirtation and she had grown fearful of the intensity of my feelings. We were from totally different worlds, and so after she had married someone else, there was no point in pretending that we could be “close friends” for that had never been the basis of our relationship. And I understood that love should always die spectacularly, or at least with dignity, and not of a wasting disease.

I recovered – sort of. Two years later, I met Jane Scott Plummer. Reader, I married her and lived happily ever afterwards – she is my soulmate and the light of my life.



Her Majesty has asked if you
could book her a bungee jump?



What happened to Mary? Her marriage wasn't happy and when I heard this, I tried – more or less successfully – not to be too pleased. Then, very tragically, Mary contracted ovarian cancer around 1988 and died.

On cool reflection, if I had married her – as I would have done if my immediate and insistent prayers had been answered – Jane and I would never have got married. Then, of course, Clare, Milly, Thomas and Oliver would never have been born, and nor would 11 blessed grandchildren. It would have been another world.

**“Be careful what
you wish for.”**

I told this story to one of my grandchildren when a relationship had gone awry. Never let a near disaster go to waste. When God fails to answer your passionate prayers of the heart, it is nearly always a good thing.

Oh yes, and be careful what you wish for.

Take That!

Glad for all over a certain age to see HM The Queen out riding, aged 94... and without a hard hat.

Royal sucks to health and safety!

All Is Vanity

10 September — Day 4: East Challow

A perfect day's walking, the sort of day to convince one that Brexit and Covid are mere illusions, and that reality is to walk in the wonderful English countryside on a sunny day with friendly people. God is in his heaven, all is right with the world.

We zipped through Letcombe Regis and Wantage, down muddy and rutty tracks and through softly undulating cornfields. We discussed – inevitably – whether the government's reaction to this miserable pandemic is overdone? We decided that when all other countries had “locked-down” – particularly Germany – we had no realistic choice but to follow. But the massive collateral damage to our economy and the welfare of people is such that from now on we will have to learn to live with the threat of this disease and accept deaths. For what will we do when the next pandemic emerges, as it surely will? We can't be turning our economy on and off like a motor engine every couple of years. We can't just keep removing the common sense and liberties of the people and handing them over to whoever is in power in Downing Street. That way points to ruin and madness.

A Moment of Reflection

I caught myself glancing at my reflection in a shop window and wondered whether I should get a new walking outfit? I have worn the same trousers and hat for 10 years, and idiotically I have grown to be rather fond of them. This is despite the fact that my trousers are shredded from a battle with a thorn bush – they lost – and beyond even covering the modesty of a scarecrow. But then I thought, why bother? Provided I am reasonably clean and decent, who would I be trying to impress and why?

Past blog readers may recall my story of how I admitted at a family gathering that by the age of 60, I felt I had become invisible. Women no longer saw me as a “sex object” and just looked straight through me.

“Hold on,” said daughter Clare roaring with merriment. “When did anyone, at any time, think you were a sex object? Don't give us the date, the decade will do!”

Ha ha!

So We'll No More Go a Roving...

There's no fool like an old fool. Recently, I found myself trying to be charming to a pretty waitress and I wondered why I was bothering?

Some time later, I caught myself typing “Love, Tom” and adding a couple of “xx” in an email to a woman who once worked for me.

Today, careers are ruined in a flash, so why was I taking such a stupid risk? I didn’t mean anything by it, so what was I trying to prove?

I must reassess exactly who I signal to, and why? It’s a pulsating, red danger area. Over the past few years, and particularly after the Weinstein affair, industrial numbers of men have had their lives destroyed by women denouncing them as perverts. The line drawn between gentle flirting and being a deviant is becoming blurred: sexual assault and harassment have been turned into a “monolithic” category.

So I no longer want to do even the tiniest tango in the men/women sex dance. Perhaps I have deluded myself that I may be, in some antique sort of way, still vaguely sexy? It’s a mistake made by all too many men as they grow older. Like frogs in a pot warming slowly and stupidly towards inevitable death, they fail to notice that the gestures that were possibly once delightful or amusing have in fact grown nauseating.

The idea that any women might overlook my saggy face or my gone-with-the-wind muscle tone, and actually want to have sex with me without substantial payment in advance, is wholly absurd. It’s nothing other than

the ludicrous vanity of a decaying ego. So it’s time to stop trying to be charming to waitresses or making women laugh. “Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.” Simply, it demeans me.



No more keeping my tummy tucked in and trying to look manly, and no more poncing about in tight shirts. No more fretting about whether my suit is creased or not, or wondering if my bald patch is showing. No more the mysterious half smile across a crowded room that I once thought looked fascinating but probably today looks like Steptoe leering at an unguarded fiver. Stop acting like a grotesque old fool!

**“Vanity of vanities.
All is vanity.”**

Weinstein has woken me up to harsh reality – and he’s probably done me a favour.

The Wheat and the Chaff

It is said that Baroness Thatcher never knew a day's happiness after she was ousted from Downing Street. There's a tragic picture of her in Jonathan Aitken's biography, *Power and Personality*, sitting outside the Lords, draped in ermine, three hours before the doors opened.

Perhaps when the shouting crowds departed and the phones stopped ringing, loneliness – at the horrifying realisation that true friends were thin on the ground – slowly engulfed her magnificent spirit.

I had a friend – let's call him Richard – who was the CEO of a large company. In his gift were millions of pounds in supply contracts. When his company was taken over, he lost his job. Richard was now unemployed but he confidently drew up a list of contacts with a view to meeting up to discuss the future and asking for their help. On the list were many people with whom he had socialised – he had been to dinner at their houses and he counted them as close friends. He was profoundly distressed when only a tiny minority responded and the rest made their excuses. Out of office, he was of no use. His unemployed status meant he was dumped on his so-called friends' "loser" list. Richard was learning, in the most brutal way possible, the difference between social froth and real friends – those people who treasure us for who we really are.

“The crowd can be cruel and hopelessly stupid.”

Some people never experience a “High Noon”, that moment of truth that shows us our real friends. How the royal family differentiate between deferential courtiers and real buddies is a mystery to me!

When we are very young, we are desperately vulnerable about what our peer group thinks of us. We copy what they listen to, what they wear, what they drive, what they eat, where they go to for entertainment, and even the jobs they do. We are powerfully influenced by what

others think of us and how we will be judged.

As we now see daily on social media, the crowd can be cruel and hopelessly stupid, so what can we learn from this? There comes a time, after we have been sufficiently bruised by life, when we can appreciate the wisdom of a couple of lines in Robert Browning's poem “Rabbi Ben Ezra” – “Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be...”

Once we have reached a certain age, there is no excuse left for any confusion. Actress Sarah Bernhardt summed it up perfectly: “We must live for the few who know and appreciate us, who judge and absolve us, and for whom we have the same affection and indulgence. The rest I look upon as a mere crowd... from whom there's nothing to be expected but fleeting emotions... which leave no trace behind them.”

Top of the Class

11 September — Day 5: Buckland

Our route today took us from Buckland to Faringdon, and we did it in good time.

We lunched in Faringdon, and it was a sad occasion. First, this is more or less the second anniversary of the death of doctor and missionary Graham Scott Brown, who lived there. Graham not only sounded how I imagine the prophet Ezekiel spoke, I think he probably looked like him too: white hair, jutting eyebrows, both standing on end. A saintly and wonderful man, and I miss him.

Town and Out

Frankly, if there is such a thing as a town doctor, I would try and persuade him to give Faringdon a powder to restore her mojo. It's desperately sad to see so many shops for sale and so few people out and about. All the banks have disappeared, and the alleged 22 pubs have all – bar three – gone on the wagon.

I hope this town recovers, for once people lose the habit of shopping, they may never return.

We walked past numerous schools, both state and public – I wonder how Covid is affecting the private school market?

The Good Schools Guide

“People don't think what they feel, they don't say what they think, and they don't do what they say”.

So said David Ogilvy, US advertising genius and founder of Ogilvy and Mather. He had a profound insight into human behaviour, and his dictum makes understanding what makes people tick a lot easier.

My rich cousin – let's call him Fred – is the father of two reasonably able children. What does Ogilvy's dictum mean to him when trying to pick a school costing £40,000 p/a – oh yes, plus extras, please don't forget the extras – for each of his children (that's half a million smackeroots for the pair)? For days, he sat amongst a landfill of posh prospectuses, randomly leafing through them and agonising.

Did this or that school have talented teachers in this or that subject? How did the teacher/ children ratios compare and what were the relative merits of the facilities of each? How far were the journeys there and back? Did they do drama? Did they teach Cantonese? And how strong was the religious ethos in each? Fred worried about one school as there were rumours that some children come back “hand-waving” and he didn't



like the sound of that at all. Would his children develop leadership qualities and solid characters? Then, of course – a new one this – some offered a “happiness index”. Oh, lucky Scarlett and Piers to be alive at this hour!

I kept my mouth shut for I have long thought the whole exercise bullshit, but I didn’t want to put my hitherto excellent relationship with Fred to the test! However, I watched Ogilvy’s dictum playing out.

After literally weeks of indecision, Fred of course chose the school that most of his friends were sending their children to. So much for his objective analysis.

For however many excellent and

inspirational teachers a particular school may have recruited, what makes a “good school” is often simply having a reputation for being “good”. My cousin was not so much choosing a school on its merits as much as buying an upmarket peer group for his children and, of course, for his family.

All Fred’s browbeating was virtue signalling, the pretence of rational objectivity. In reality, people choose schools using the same yardsticks by

which they choose a pub. It doesn’t matter how good the food and beer is, if you don’t like the other clientele you don’t go.

This means that however hard a head may work to improve an unbranded school by buying in great teachers,

“I have long thought the whole exercise bullshit.”

people won't send their children if they think that other people consider another school to be "better".

The so called "top" dozen UK schools and Oxbridge/Harvard have known they are powerful "brands" – like Rolls Royce or Chanel – for centuries. It doesn't matter how economical and relatively "safe" a particular car, or how good a school really is; what matters is do other people admire it? Apparently collective consensus is more powerful than individual taste, so fashionable brands hold a sort of monopoly power. Seen this way, why do Harrow/Eton and Oxbridge deserve to have charitable status, and not Rolls Royce and Chanel?

Fred's children did fine, but broadly speaking bright children do well enough whatever private school they go to. But Fred's half a million

bought a "nice group" of contacts and buddies of the same social group, which of course was mainly what the exercise was all about in the first place.

The Colour of Justice

Martin Luther King famously dreamed that "people should not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character." We recognise that the realisation of that dream is as yet unfulfilled. But it's not just white discrimination towards people of colour that must be condemned: black discrimination against white people also needs to be rooted out and justice restored.

From 1999 to 2010, the Mugabe government brutally expelled some 4,000 farm owners because they were white. The argument that this was justified on grounds of "land redistribution" to indigenous

Zimbabweans is greatly weakened when you consider that much of the land ended up in the hands of Mugabe's close colleagues.

We hear an announcement that the government of President Mnangagwa recognises that this land theft on racial grounds greatly damages the international standing of Zimbabwe, and that he will take early steps to right this grievous wrong. Easy to announce, but who does Mnangagwa think will be the money tree?

...One day, son, this won't all be yours but one of Mnangagwa's henchmen's in a land grab



Rage, Rage at the Dying of the Light

12 September — Day 6: Great Rollright

Today brought a great gathering of friends, old and new. One was 90-year-old Christopher Turner, a very distinguished past Stowe headmaster.

It was a perfect day for walking through some of merrie old England's finest countryside. When such flawless beauty is right on our doorstep, why would anyone want to crawl off to the likes of crowded Ibiza or Mallorca? They are furnace-hot and packed with the well-padded and much tattooed at this time of year. And just the thought of squatting on a beach getting sand where the blistering sun don't shine fills me with gloom. So I am pleased the crowds have left our paradise walks alone for us to enjoy – and we give God thanks for them.

I recall the ancient Venetian Doge's saying: "Why travel when you've already arrived?"

Public Grouse

Some publicans are funny – I mean in the peculiar sense, not funny ha ha! You would think in the midst of this pandemic they would be gagging for any business. But when we gently enquired of one if lunch was being served, she indignantly snapped, "No!" And then when we asked if we could eat sandwiches in the bar and order drinks, she still refused.

Anthony and Clare Wells, who were walking with us – heroes both – kindly laid on a feast as wildly generous as Ratty's of *The Wind in the Willows* in their house.

Who Are You Calling Old?

I have just received a greeting from a buddy who said that Jane and my walking long distances once again was "very noble and courageous"! Remembering *Yes Minister*, what he really meant was, "You are barmy to be walking these distances at your age!"

I note with interest that both the US presidential candidates are more or less the same age as I am. When President Reagan was fighting Democratic candidate Walter Mondale in the 1984 election, he said, "I do not propose to make age an issue in this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's relative youth and inexperience."

Well said, Mr President – who was by then a very "senior citizen" at 73. It's clear, though, that ageism is the last tolerated prejudice.

The description "senior citizen" is often heard today but it's one I hate. It's patronising, and nearly as irritating as the road sign of an aged crone, curved like a hockey stick,

All I said was, "make way for a couple of senior citizens..."



who serves as a warning to cars that an aged person may try to stagger across the road at any given moment. Then there's that ghastly term "over seventies", or what about "the vulnerable", an even more dreadful slur? I feel no more vulnerable than the Pennine Way!

"Oldies" – the very word conjures up laxatives, false teeth and incontinence pads. And what about nasal hair, invalid scooters, daytime TV, reused tea bags, bowls and bingo! Oldies are grouped officially under the HMG's heading of "the retired": in other words, yesterday's folk, clapped-out and finished. All this twaddle bolsters the existing belief amongst the general public that the old should suck their toothless gums out of everyone's way.

"Oldies – the very word conjures up laxatives..."

Long Live the Silver Hares!

I am in the over-seventies group but neither Jane nor I have ever defined ourselves by age and we have no intention of starting now. Our doctors check us out as fine, and we are a great deal fitter than many younger people who smoke, eat and drink to excess. We hiked from Edinburgh to London – covering 16 miles a day – when I was in my seventieth year and Jane wasn't far behind. Since then, we have walked at least 2,500 miles round the UK for ZANE, and the only one in our party who ever gets over-tired is the dog.

Of course, we know we are lucky to possess great energy and enthusiasm for life, and a zest for new ideas and adventure. There are hundreds of thousands of others like us who feel the same way, and although we'll all contract the galloping ab dabs and fall over one day, till then we intend to zip along like the bullets God cast us to be. Look at Maggie Smith, Helen Mirren, Judie Dench and HM the Queen – all of them still in their prime.

It is monstrous that ageism is a tolerated prejudice. But you can't say a word against the obese! When we walk for ZANE, I am

warned not even to mention that our blessed island is crowded with fatties waddling along pavements and

barrelling us skinnies into the road. It has been proved that being obese – and that includes over a third of the UK population – is one of the major contributing factors to Covid deaths. So, Fatso Boris, that's why you nearly died – get on a crash diet now! However, if HMG's spokesmen had mentioned this ironclad fact, there would have been a chorus of denial and indignation.

We refuse to be thrown on the scrapheap of life because of ageism and neither will many of our friends. Long live the silver hares!

Cattitude

Recently, our little tabby, Kariba, went missing for three days and I missed her dreadfully. Kariba and I have a routine: each night, when I am just in bed, she jumps lightly onto my chest, sticks her nose an inch from mine, and stares unwinking and relentlessly into my eyes. She waits until I have tickled her ears and stroked her throat, and then, when she has had enough, with a flick of her tail, boom! She's away.



The routine is, of course, wholly on her terms. A random movement and she's off in a huff. The real reason I treasure these sacred few minutes is because she ignores Jane completely. I like that. Jane says she only jumps on my chest because it's bigger than hers. She claims cats don't form attachments anyway, and she's only ours because we feed her – but I know that's a lie. Kariba loves me more than Jane, so there! Anyway, Jane gets all the affection and love from that darn stupid dog, Moses. Of course, I pretend not to care – but deep down, I do. Quite a lot, actually. So Kariba is my favourite animal by a country mile and I love her unconditionally.

Anyway, when Kariba went missing, I was wholly distraught. We wrote a notice to be posted everywhere we could think of and were just about to smother the district when Kariba crawled through the back door. It was clear she'd been savaged by some damned dog: she was covered in cuts and her tail was bent. She must have been recovering in a ditch somewhere until she recovered her strength sufficiently to come home to me. I was overjoyed. Kariba is alive, and after a couple of hundred quid's worth of ointment and pills – note to my grandchildren, become a vet! – she has recovered her bounce, is back squatting on my chest, and once again staring deeply into my eyes.

Kariba still loves me.

Pensioners to the Pole

13 September — Rest Day

The so-called “day off” is a chance to see to our equipment, examine our toes and kneecaps, and answer emails. I bought a new wax jacket to cater for the weather but as luck would have it, it looks like it won't be needed.

My new Meindl boots – have I mentioned them already? – are excellent. And no, I don't get paid for promoting them! Of course, they are expensive but the difference between the cheap and the best is the same as a local tennis club and Wimbledon: simply vast. Other boots last just one walk, Meindl boots last three.

My beloved Aunt Nancy used to hoard string and brown paper; she also used to knit jerseys like a demon and darn socks – when did you last see that? She was very wise and used to say, “I can't afford anything but the best.” At the time, I didn't understand what she was talking about, but now I know. The bargains wear out, the best endure. These boots prove that the great Bernard Levin was spot on when he advised us to write on our mirrors, “There's no such thing as a bargain!”

No Fool Like an Old Fool...

And now an admission of great folly... Some time ago, I made a comprehensive, copper-bottomed

fool of myself as only I can. For those who don't want their illusions about my invincibility shattered beyond repair, I suggest you avert your eyes.

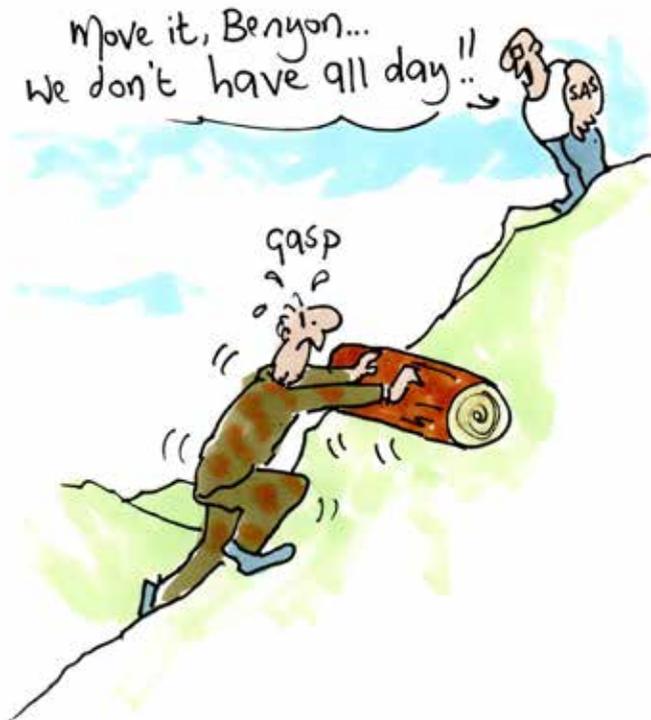
Jane and I had just completed the feat of walking from Edinburgh to London. Perhaps this made us overconfident, leading me to believe the sweet bird of youth was still hovering on my shoulder and had no plans to flap away just yet. I determined to lead a stalwart team of seventy-plus enthusiasts to walk to the South Pole under the strapline “Pensioners to the Pole” to raise money for ZANE. To that end – and I do nothing by halves – I hired a doughty advisory firm that exploits groups of lunatics who want to do that sort of thing, and we hired the services of a gimlet-eyed ex-SAS “South Pole expert” called Fred Eisenheim to achieve “Mission Impossible”, and simply get us there and back alive. I then recruited a team of aged heroes who were sufficiently deluded to want to come too.

A group was assembled. I confess the group of mainly men comprised an improbable lot of Dad's Army lookalikes. The one thing they all had in common was an illusion of still being “up for it”, whatever “it” might be.

We went into training. There were endless runs and push-ups at a local camp, then a weekend of crossing rivers with a beer barrel, two short planks and three bits of rope – things I did a lifetime ago at RMA Sandhurst. Then we rolled logs uphill and ran in circles, the aim of which wholly escapes me. However, what had been easy-peasy for a teenager soon proved to be several bridges too far for me in my sere and yellow. Twice I felt it vital to check the whereabouts of the nearest A&E. What was especially irritating was that Jane was leaping around like Bear Grylls on steroids, leaving me

wheeling and staggering about on leaden feet with a stupid smile glued onto my sweaty face. For heaven's sake, I was meant to be the dynamo leading this chaos, not playing Captain Mainwaring's double – who, now I come to think about it, is long since dead.

Then came the great advanced training week: living in tents on a glacier parked somewhere in darkest Iceland. By this time, half the group – the wise ones – had dropped out. The temperature was 30 below and falling. Clouds, apparently made of hewn marble, piled up for a storm and the snow swept by in curtains. I



was paralysed with anxiety and cold. The packet food proved to be the ultimate laxative.

I looked at the crumpled tent I had carried for miles. I had no idea how to erect it and I didn't care. I wanted out, fast.

Suddenly, and I swear this is true, one of Fred's grisly assistants appeared. He was trying to be encouraging. Then he produced a packet of condoms and offered me and Jane a couple, just like that!

Jane looked at them, her face a study.

I stared at Fred and stuttered, "On a bloody glacier?"

Jane glided away, then she speeded up.

Fred understood. "Oh no, not here! You pee in them, then use them as water bottles."

This was my moment of truth: that was it! The illusion was pricked, the game was over.

It was some time before I saw Jane again...

**"Then he produced
a couple
of condoms ..."**

Stolen Moment

Our gorgeous daughter Milly came for a garden lunch in the middle of the lockdown. As she was leaving, we stole a strictly forbidden hug – it's called a "Cummins". Fascinating why these things are so much more pleasurable when you know they are out of bounds.

Sparks Will Fly

14 September — Day 7: Chastleton

It was a scorcher of a day for mid-September – and we had a great day’s walking with four loyal supporters, so we were just about legal! Our leg muscles are hardening day by day as we squeeze out some of the last year’s evil idleness.

The validity of Benyon’s rule of pain is proving itself yet again. Put simply, if you ignore muscular pain and simply walk through it, the discomfort soon subsides and after a short time you forget about it.

Who Wants to Live Forever?

I recently read of an aged man seeking permission by letter from a care home manageress to visit his wife, ending the missive with a heartrending PS: “I used to be a spitfire pilot!”

It was Penny Hastings – Max Hastings’ wife – who memorably said, “None of us is going to get out of this alive”. This needs remembering. We are becoming so sentimental and unrealistic, perhaps we will soon believe that if we throw even more money at our NHS, a doctor will eventually cry, “Eureka! We’ve cracked it – we’re all going to live forever!”

“Flu, the old man’s friend...”

Speaking entirely for myself, I have no wish to do that. So what do I want?

I want to see old age, yes – in fact, I am probably there already, but I am good at kidding myself that it’s at least two years down the road from where I am today! But I’m not talking about extreme old age, I’m not sure I want to see that. Of course, there are always outliers (HM The Queen, for example). Still, as a generality, it sounds as if a pretty miserable endgame is on the horizon for most of us.

No one dares mention this in these marshmallow times, but it’s sad that the flu, once rightly called the “old man’s friend”, is today much more easily prevented and treated.

I hope my children will continue to want to see me for fun and not through a sense of weary duty. I want my grandchildren to remember me as a sparky, intelligent and fun-loving sort of person – and not as a bald, demented figure babbling incoherently in the corner, and sitting on a rubber mat while being fed through a straw. No one says this but there are worse things than death!



It was Kingsley Amis who wrote, “No pleasure is worth giving up for the sake of spending two more years in a geriatric home in Weston-super-Mare”.

So, in a few years’ time, I may just take up point-to-point racing or stock car racing, or climb Mount Everest... Oh! And what about skydiving to add to my bucket list?

HOT Off the Press

As readers will know, I only discuss money, sex, politics religion and death in my commentaries, but not all are given equal coverage. A reader recently complained that it’s getting a bit unbalanced – “a tad thin”, as he put it – on the sex front. So ever willing, allow me to put this right...

You’ll remember that a couple of walks back, the pulses of intrepid ZANE supporters were set racing by

my introducing them to the dating apps Tindr (for heterosexuals) and Grindr (for the LGBT community). Both offer “sex made easy”: all a customer has to do is flick through photos on the relevant app, choose his or her fancy, and then take a peek at the actual person in the flesh in a nearby pub. If sufficient mutual lust is generated, then off the couple charge to commit the capital act: boom! Just like that. No romance, no letters or flowers, no hand-holding. For goodness’ sake, not even a box of Smarties changes hands!

If you prefer your sex delivered in the same way you order a hamburger, then this is the system for you.

So what’s the next hot thing to boost a jaded marriage? You can rely on ZANE to do the research!

Is the wife spending too much time deadheading the roses? Is

your hubbie addicted to scraping barnacles off the bottom of his boat? Yes? What can you do to recapture the sparks of the past?

Buy some electronic underwear, that's what! For 25 bucks, ZANE supporters can buy a pair of boxer shorts or knickers – both if you're bisexual – and pop them on when the mood takes you. Both come in garish hot pink.

Now, this is the clever bit. Each pair contains a microchip that slots into a small pocket at the back.

So the scene is set. You're up for it. Now there is your loved one, say, sloping out of the loo. To attract her attention, just creep within 5 metres. An alert automatically appears on her smartphone inviting her to enter "love mode". Then follows a playlist of romantic music. We are told she is

"...both if you're bisexual."

bound to hurl away the Harpic brush and swoon at once into your arms.

Apparently, 1,000 pairs of these amazing pants sell in a month. And sorry about this – for the resolute, only – second-hand pairs are available on Ebay.

The inventor, Wolfgang Kamphartold – yes, he was bound to be German – claims, "Whether at dinner or in the bedroom... this is the best way to start conversations."

Well that's for sure: much more interesting than the *Times* crossword!

ZANE supporters, how will your marriage survive without these pants?

Remember! You heard about them from me first.

You've put my underpants in the wash?! Well that's our sex life over then!



Best of British

15 September — Day 8: Bourton-on-the-Water

Another red-hot day and we were met by three delightful ZANE supporters who walked the entire route with us.

At lunch, we were greeted by Ralph Fergusson Kelly, who motorbiked from Monmouth to meet us, bless him.

Hume Truths

Some of our companions were Catholic. I reminded them of the teaching of Cardinal Basil Hume when he was a master at Ampleforth School. I have told this story to supporters in an earlier blog, but it's worth repeating.

There were roughly 100 boys present on this particular occasion. One courteously told Hume that they were fed up with Bible teaching as it had no relevance to their lives.

“Sir, Henry over there is going into the City, Mike is to be a lawyer, Charles will inherit an estate, I'm going into the army. We all agree, we just don't need God!”

Hume then said quietly, “Gentlemen, society estimates that for those of you who marry, 40 per cent will suffer the pain of discovering that your partner has been unfaithful; 40 per cent of marriages end in failure; 60 per cent of you will find your children

are in deep trouble with money or drugs; 30 per cent of you will face acute financial difficulties; 10 per cent of you will go bankrupt; 3 per cent will face criminal proceedings; and 1 per cent will face prison (and I am looking at you, Henry!)

Seventy per cent of you will face bereavement – and 100 per cent of you will face terminal illness and death.

May I suggest, gentlemen, that at all these dreadful times you will be grateful for the Gospel of Christ. Good afternoon.”

There was a stunned silence.

No Apologies

As we walked, we wondered why we listen to the so-called “left-wing” who talk down to the rest of us from a position of moral superiority? And why, if we are such an intolerably racist society, immigrants risk life and limb to come and live, not in the EU countries they pass through, but in the UK?

We wondered why on earth so many of us are ashamed of our past? Why do we listen to students who impertinently lecture us about whether our statues should remain standing or not? Why do we blame ourselves for all conflicts, past, present and future?

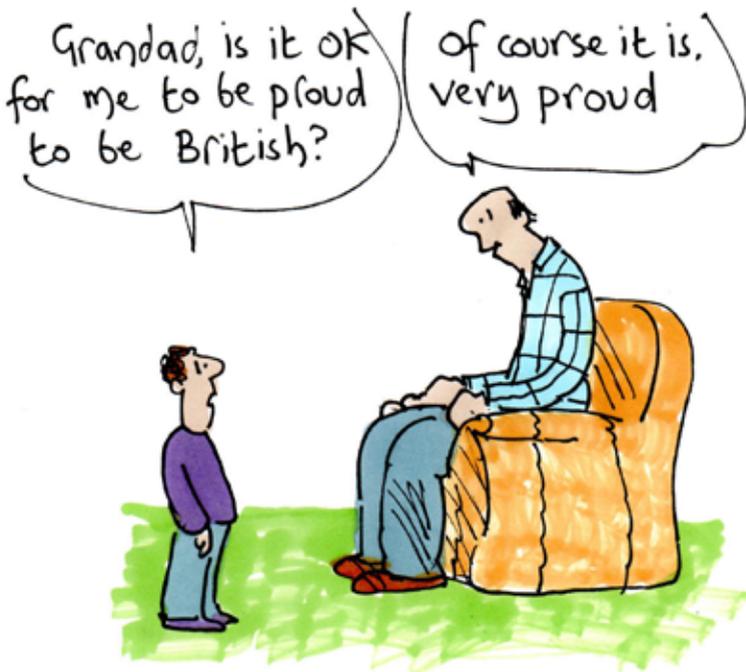
Why do our teachers feed our young a thin-gruel diet of misery, hatred and shame for our past so as to pox their present and future with negativity?

Why not teach children the truth? Of course, Britain has made plenty of ghastly mistakes, and our motives were seldom pure, but we are also the cause of much that is right in the world. We abolished the evil of slavery – practised throughout history by all other countries, including Africa – and are the pioneers of parliamentary democracy, constitutional monarchy and equality. The English language – our gift to the world – is used internationally in diplomacy, in

“Why not teach children the truth?”

commerce, in technology, education, government and invention. And our Magna Carta was the underpinning of global law, the foundation of order in the free world. Our judiciary is independent, and our property rights, labour laws and legal reasoning are the envy of the world. We are an honest place in which to do business: not many countries can boast that.

Our DNA is that of openness and fairness, and our well-founded laws and freedom mark us out as a special people. This isn't elitism, rather self-awareness. Our patriotism is based on our love and respect for our institutions, laws, heritage and ideas. As a nation of



under 70 million people, we outrank many larger nations in terms of scientific and medical innovation as well as rare achievements in sports, entertainment, the financial sector, tourism and art.

Today we lead the world in social reform and the development of hospital care, and our legacy of ethics, kindness and charity shows our country at its best.

Now is the time for us to stop saying we are sorry about being British. We still have much to teach.

A Sense of Perspective

I don't complain (much) in restaurants, and I'll tell you why.

There are at least 4 billion suns in the Milky Way. Many of them are thousands of times larger than our own sun, and vast millions of them have whole planetary systems, including literally billions of satellites. All this revolves at a rate of about a million miles an hour, like a huge oval pinwheel.

Our own sun and planets, which include the Earth, are on the edge of the wheel. This is only our small corner of the universe, so why don't these billions of revolving and rotating suns and planets collide? The answer is that space is so unbelievably vast that if we reduced the suns and planets in

correct mathematical proportions to the distances between them, each sun would be a speck of dust, several thousand miles from its nearest neighbour.

And, mind you, that's only the Milky Way. How many galaxies are there? At least 100 billion in the known universe. Billions and billions of them are spaced at about one million light-years apart (one light-year is about six trillion miles). The scientists have found that the further you go out into space with the telescopes, the thicker the galaxies become. There are billions of billions that are as yet undiscovered by the scientists' cameras and astrophysicists' calculations.



So in the scheme of things, it seems a little silly to fret if a pub has run out of ginger beer...

Acts of Rebellion

16 September — Day 9: Charlton-on-Otmoor

Last night I told General Jane that she couldn't map-read for toffee. Then I reminded her helpfully of the time last year when she lead us 4 miles in the wrong direction. She told me that I was less than supportive – in fact, what she said was rather less ladylike than that and not to be repeated in a family blog. She referred to my ancestry and then she listed some of my less than savoury habits. She then slouched to bed without saying “Good night, darling” as she usually does. She watched *Downton Abbey* on her screen while I watched *Newsnight*, both of us in a brown study. When it was time to sleep, I turned over so all she could see was my right shoulder, and we didn't hold hands as we always do.

To my silent fury, Kariba the cat then went and sat on Jane's chest, not mine. That irritated me more than anything. The bloody cat knew what was happening and was taking sides!

This morning, and after a good night's sleep, we concluded that as neither of us was going to leave the other – for who on earth would take us in? – we had no option but to kiss and make up.

I said, “Sorry darling, it was my fault entirely.” Jane immediately

agreed and so we stopped acting like children.

The Real Thing

Today was apparently the AGM of the ZANE branch of the “Otmoor and Islip Ladies WI and Golfing Society”, who decided to walk with us. I couldn't count how many people were there but I have made a note to ask Dominic Cummings where to go to in Barnard Castle to have my eyes tested.

One walker asked me why I was a Christian. I asked whether she had read the Book of Acts?

GK Chesterton wrote that atheists have to be careful about what books they read. They should certainly avoid the Book of Acts for it relates how 12 ordinary and randomly chosen fishermen, without formal education or training of any sort, morphed into courageous martyrs who ended up transforming the world.

Jesus knew from the start that his recruits were, to put it politely, not academic. In fact, they were all over the place, without a clue as to who Jesus was or what he was about. Running away, lying ineptly, sinking in water, hacking off an ear, deserting Jesus when the going got rough – they could have been any of us.

It wasn't until after Jesus' resurrection and after his message had been tattooed into their flesh that these ordinary men grew into courageous giants, prepared to die for the truth. Wholly hopeless and ignorant small-time fishermen at the outset, they ended up being changed so profoundly that their words have tumbled down the ages to teach Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Cranmer and today's thinkers in the Church. Their transformation dramatically changed the world.

Yet if these 12 hadn't met Jesus, they would probably have lived rather boring, workaday lives. I imagine them fishing, marrying and bringing up children – and then taking care of Granny and Grandpa before finally dying anonymously in their beds.

“It’s a truly terrifying story.”

But instead, because Jesus marinated their lives with the word of God, they chose to live as penniless vagrants who were flayed, crucified or stoned to death.

It's a truly terrifying story and not for the faint-hearted! Perhaps we all instinctively know, deep in our souls, that if we get too close to the real thing and realise that the Gospel is not about respectability and morals, our lives will undergo a dramatic

upheaval. And thinking sceptics will have some explaining to do: if the transformation in the lives of these ordinary men was not a supernatural

intervention, then what exactly was it? What could have brought about such a revolution?

... and then I met
Jesus!!!



The Great and the Good

On most days, I tip my hat towards Churchill's grave, sited only 200 yards from where we live. There he rests under a simple slab with Clementine, his parents, four of his children, his brother and his grandson. It's just a simple country churchyard. But when your reputation is indelibly stamped on the memory of your country, you don't really need a vast memorial, do you?

And of course he will be remembered, for he is one of the rare ones, a giant who will be celebrated as long as our ancient history is told. But it's a select club. We have of course the great

**"Most of us will
be forgotten
pretty soon..."**

composers and writers, names too well known to have to list. And then there are the outliers like Christopher Wren whose memorial in St Paul's states, "If you would seek my monument, look around you."

But most of us will be forgotten pretty soon. Even the once quite famous are destined for near oblivion. Can you list the prime ministers who served before the last war? Have a go. I'll start with Lloyd George, Stanley Baldwin, Asquith (what was his first name?), Henry Campbell-Bannerman – but are they in the right order? No cheating, mind! And who remembers the names of their foreign secretaries? No, neither do I.

The point is made by Michael Heseltine, surely the greatest politician in the past 50 years never to have become PM. Although he was deputy prime minister and held many of the great offices of state, he says, wisely, that in a hundred years' time, the only thing that he will be remembered for are the trees he planted on his estate.

In the words of the hymn by Isaac Watts:

*Time, like an ever-rolling
stream
Bears all its sons away.*

The guy next door died yesterday
... Oh what's he called now



Requiem for a Friend

17 September — Day 10: Leaffield

It was slightly less humid today and thank goodness for that.

We were joined by three delightful companions, two young women and their mum.

The last mile proved to be a chore, though, for a farmer, the greedy toad, had ploughed up the path, and you know how hard that can make walking.

Our friend David Cook turned up, which was a real treat.

As we surely all recognise, true friendship is a considerable gift. But of course, not all of my friends live happily in this difficult world...

The Short Way Down

Whenever I see someone begging, I give them something. Why? Because it could so easily be me.

Several months ago, I attended the funeral of one of our oldest friends. He died alone – from a massive heart attack – in a cold, remote cottage in Ireland, alienated from his family and friends.

He started out so well. Good looking and charming, he went to a top public school followed by Oxford, then he worked in a famous bank. He seemed to make excellent progress, managing to forge

friendships with leading politicians and bankers who appeared to be genuinely fond of him. Then he married a well-connected and lovely woman. What could possibly go wrong?

Lots. Drip by drip, the wheels started to rattle and then grind. The bank “let him go” and he was forced to make deals by himself. But they were always the smaller types of deals, the dodgy ones that the banks didn’t want – the deals you have to make, whether good or bad, to keep the bailiffs away. Of course, these are the deals most likely to fail.



Optimism shredded as confidence drained – and then the best of the deals that had to work somehow just didn't.

At first other people were to blame, but as the list of failures grew, his buddies began to smell failure and backed away. Then the phone stopped ringing and his calls went unanswered. Money grew tight and my friend started to drink. His realisation at the size of the gap between what he had hoped for and what had come to pass hurt, and he wanted to dull that pain.

He was caught out in some scam or other – probably someone else's fault – and he found himself in the nick for a six-month stretch. His wife

left him, and his adult children grew ashamed and became alienated.

His friends kept him off the streets... just. But you can't live people's lives for them, and pride made him strongly resistant to advice.

It's a tough life. In *The Magnificent Seven*, the leading bandit, played by Eli Wallach, says to the character played by Yul Brynner about the vulnerable villagers he was exploiting, "If God didn't want them fleeced, he wouldn't have made them sheep." Some truth in that. And "dog does eat dog" – it is only the winners who get the prizes. Laugh and the world (does) laugh with you; cry and you (do) cry alone. All these sayings can be validated in this harsh, cold world.



That's why my friend died sad and alone. And "there but by the grace of God go I."

A Matter of Taste

There is a Welsh saying that the harp should be played with a smile on your face or a tear in your eye – or not at all. I like that. It's not just the harp: what about our response to poetry, paintings and music?

I have stood before the painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Rembrandt in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. It evokes an acute sense of awe in the face of a genius that I could never hope to emulate in a thousand years. I can feel the same way about the glories of Handel's *Messiah*, Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, or after watching Shakespeare's *King Lear* or reading one of his sonnets.

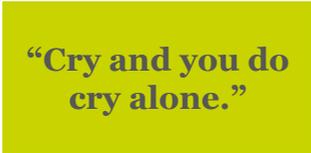
The late American cartoonist Al Capp summed up abstract art when he wrote that it is "a product of the untalented, sold by the unprincipled to the utterly bewildered."

So when I see an unmade bed littered with fag packets and condoms, a cow's intestine pickled in brine, a baked bean tin suspended from a skeleton's neck, or an old sofa covered in women's underclothes – and read the tripe uttered by the art experts – I wholeheartedly agree with Al Capp.

I am sure that there are some who genuinely find modern art wonderful – and good luck to them. But I want to encourage all who may not be confident in their own choices not to be bullied by the "experts" into an affectation of admiration.

We all instinctively know whether or not something holds meaning for us. And forget what is fashionable – you don't need a three-year degree in art appreciation to know if you like a piece or not.

So why not be like the boy who announced the "emperor has no clothes", and believe in your own good taste? It's good because it's yours.



"Cry and you do cry alone."

Sound and Fury

18 September — Day 11: Chadlington

It was a wonderful day for a walk, and our company was blessed by friends old and new.

We booked in to The Chequers in Churchill and what an excellent choice it turned out to be – fresh with an interesting menu.

But as we walked, the topic of Brexit inevitably reared its head again...

Armageddon

Are you still worried that devastation – on top of the damage already inflicted by the pandemic – will wreck the UK when we finally leave the EU on 1 January 2021?

Do you recall Y2K? This was the “Millennium Bug”, the terror we believed would befall us at the beginning of the year 2000. It was thought that flawed computer software would send civilisation into chaos at midnight on 31 January 1999. Computers would be unable to recognise the new date, and not only would Cinderella forget to leave the ball, but planes would rocket from the sky, hospital computers would wheeze to a halt, boats would do a Titanic and Armageddon would fall upon us!

And what happened? Nothing: plain zero! It was the biggest non-event of the last 25 years.

Keep Calm and Carry On

Now to Brexit. We British are good at muddling through and muddle through we will. Of course, we all know now that the EU oligarchs will do everything they can to make our lives as difficult and as uncomfortable as possible, so I anticipate 2021 will be a bumpy year.

Er...no mum, it's not falling from the sky, it's landing at the airport





According to philanthropist Miles Morland, we are, along with the US, one of the two great post-industrial powers to dominate the great post-industrial industries – the intellectual-intensive industries as opposed to the capital-intensive ones at which the Germans excel. And our negotiating hand is a strong one. The EU has its fair share of worries: the garlic belt of “PIGS” (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain) are facing bankruptcy due to suffering the effects of an overvalued euro. Germany prospers at the PIGS’ expense because for it, the euro is undervalued. This is unsustainable.

The euro is like trying to squeeze Kate Moss and Philip Green into the same pair of knickers. Meanwhile, poor old Macron’s plans to invent a new Europe lie in tatters. He has achieved the impossible by becoming

even more unpopular than his predecessor, François Hollande.

The media is obsessed with trade agreements. But why are they so important? The countries that have exported over the last 50 years – China, Japan and Taiwan – have had

few trade agreements with the countries to which they send most of their goods. The plusses and minuses of trade agreements tend to be more than offset by monthly

currency movements. They are a red herring used to frighten the ignorant.

Brexit is the new YK2: full of sound and fury, yet, at least in economic terms, signifying little and soon forgotten.

Sinners and Saints

In a previous blog, I wrote about the marriage of Sir Peter Harding. I have since discovered another part

“...trying to squeeze Kate Moss and Philip Green into the same pair of knickers.”

to the saga, and as there is a moral to the tale that should be learned by all ZANE supporters over 55, perhaps it's worth repeating. I should add that this story is in the public domain, so I breach no confidences.

Air Marshall Sir Peter Harding had a glittering career. In 1992, he ended up as Chief of the Defence Staff. One fateful day, at an innocent lunch, he caught the eye of Lady Bienvenida Buck who placed her hand on his knee and indicated she fancied him.

A few weeks later, at around 4pm, flashlights exploded as the couple were caught staggering out of the Savoy after an afternoon of illicit passion.

The "lady" had sold the story for £100,000 to the *News of the World* using the services of the ghastly, now thankfully late, Max Clifford – who was later jailed for sexual assaults on underage girls and young women.

A humiliated Harding immediately resigned and told his wife, Sheila, his career was over – it was – and that the publicity would be horrendous – he was right. Then he braced himself to be kicked out of the house, his marriage over.

Sheila took off her wedding ring, laid it on the table, and then replaced it, gently saying, "Let's start our marriage again!"



The next day Harding's peers – disregarding the biblical story of the woman caught out in adultery and “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone...” – sought to persuade the then Secretary of State for Defence, Sir Malcolm Rifkind, to allow them to hold “disciplinary proceedings”. They wanted to publicly strip Harding of his rank.

Rifkind was astonished that Harding's friends and colleagues wanted to give a broken man a good kicking. But the five-star officers – all retired marshals of the RAF – were insistent. “Harding has disgraced his profession. Only five-star officers can form the tribunal, for only five-star officers can judge other five-star officers”. I should add that these men did not have the support of the Chief of the Air Staff or the Chief of Defence Staff.

Rifkind is a QC and his legal training kicked in. He told the men they couldn't proceed.

“Why?” they demanded hotly.

Rifkind replied, “It's a firm principle of law that we are innocent until proven guilty. As you have clearly already decided Harding is guilty, your so called “tribunal” cannot take place.” The men were furious but had to accept the ruling.

Moral? If you're a man, there are two. First, find a wife like Sheila Harding – a total star – and bind

her to your soul with hoops of steel. Second, if you are over 50 and a lady places her hand on your knee and tells you she fancies your body, run for the hills. She is lying!

We Shall Remember Them

We have all become so fearful of death that some vicars can't even bring themselves to say the words “dead” or “died”. Our vicar daintily says, “He has passed away!” Ugh!

The Victorians may have been rather prurient about sex, but they knew how to deal with death for it was all

around them. Take Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. Imagine if instead of the famous line “Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail”,

Dickens had written, “Marley passed away.” I think the impact would have been somewhat reduced!

At 11am on Saturday, 15 August 2020, Waitrose held a mandatory two-minute silence amongst its staff and customers all across the UK. However, VJ day appears to have been overlooked by many churches, apparently smothered by Covid-19 and its relatively tiny impact. Perhaps they think that VJ will be dealt with on Remembrance Sunday – but that remembers all wars, not just the Second World War.

The Second World War was different in its effect and scale to all other conflicts. Many of the now few survivors of the concentration camps worry that when they are dead, the

**“Run for the hills,
she is lying!”**

dreadful events that enveloped them will be forgotten along with their anguish. They are right to worry for when we say of the dead, “They shall never be forgotten” and “When the sun goes down, we shall remember them”, perhaps we should keep our fingers tightly crossed. Let’s be frank. To the young, anyway, the “glorious dead” of both wars have ceased to be relevant. Perhaps the two world wars should be tucked away in history books along with the Roman invasion of Britain.

Yet we should teach the young that the devastating impact of the Second World War vastly influenced the lives of everyone in the world. The rescuing of the free world from Nazi rule has affected us all.

Then what about the destruction? Let’s be clear: none of the 61 million dead merely “passed away!” Some

2 million were savagely killed at the battle of Stalingrad alone and another 500,000 on D-Day. The UK’s total for that war was 400,000, and then of course 6 million Jews were infamously murdered. The rest of the 61 million were drowned, shot, bombed, blown up, slaughtered,

maimed, starved, gassed, machine-gunned – sometimes by their own side to stop them running away – burned alive in planes, or died in the prisons of Stalin and Hitler. Then, of course, there were the dead from the nuclear bombs dropped in Japan that irrevocably changed the course of world history. And it was in the cause of freedom they died.

It was quite an event, so no more “passing away” please.

And it puts Covid-19 into some sort of perspective...

**“No more
‘passing away’
please.”**

Amazing Grace

19 September — Day 12: Stonesfield and Finstock

I shambled up to Stonesfield, as old as sin and not two pounds of me hanging straight.

But then the day suddenly looked up as the walk gathered together some of my favourite people: General Jane, our beloved daughter Rev Clare Hayns, and our son-in-law and close ZANE chum, John Hayns. I reckon Clare passes on a regular MOT and state-of-health report about us to the rest of our children.

Then the lovely Alannah Jeune, an Oxford post-grad student who played the trumpet at the outset of our last walk in Canterbury, joined us too.

It's been a glorious day with up-and-down paths that threaded through sun-spangled woods. We imagined that at any moment Robin Hood and Friar Tuck might advance through the trees before us. To the left we could glimpse a small lake, and on the right was a small stream for Moses and Layla (the Hayns' dog) to splash in, both giving shrill squeals of pure delight. What more could I possibly want than to be alive at this hour?

Dames and Broads

We discussed the news that Sasha Swire has sold the details of private conversations with her political

“friends” to the media for money. Seems pretty tawdry to me. Who can anyone trust? Who would be daft enough to risk going into politics today? UK ambassador to the US, Tim Darroch (now Lord) found his confidential report – critical of Trump – leaked, and his career destroyed. ZANE supporters will recall that John Major was traduced by Edwina Currie when she sold the secrets of their brief romance to the papers.

You can only behave like this once. Do the likes of Swire or Currie, or Lady Buck (see yesterday's blog), deserve any real friends?

The great film actor Humphrey Bogart divided women into two camps: “dames” and “broads”. I reckon I know to which camp Swire and Currie belong...

“Forgiveness is a tough call...”

I wonder whether Sasha's friends will ever forgive and trust her again? For forgiveness is a tough call – it's easy to say you forgive someone but very hard to actually “live” it.

All of us have been let down badly at some time in our lives and in various ways: perhaps financially, maybe by friends, parents or other family members. What about being double-crossed or betrayed by someone you trust? Maybe you have been the subject of abuse? Perhaps you have been the “innocent party” in adultery, or the so-called “guilty” party, and then find forgiving yourself really hard?

But forgiveness can be found in even the hardest of cases...

Forgiving the Unforgiveable

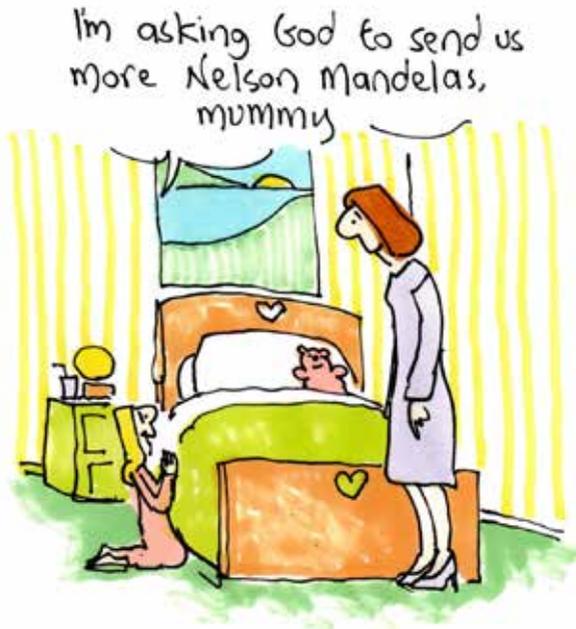
Those of you who have been to Robben Island in South Africa will have stood in the tiny cell where Nelson Mandela was locked up, and

seen the thin mat on the cold floor on which he spent his nights. He was there for 18 long years.

Such squalid conditions usually give birth to enraged avengers, sworn to exact retribution on those who have ruined their lives and traduced their country. We can understand this embittered logic – indeed, we see the results of anger and retribution nightly on our television screens.

The enormity of Mandela’s forgiveness towards his opponents is hard to understand for it’s all about the absurdity of Grace. We can hear the impossibility of this sort of forgiveness in the words of those being crucified as the executioners

“...the absurdity of Grace.”



hammer in the nails. We hear about this sort of Grace in the voice of a daughter whose parents were murdered in Belsen as she forgives the man who slaughtered them – and allows him to admit, for the first time, his own heart-wrenching guilt.

Forgiveness through Grace comes without condition for the glory of God. Secular humanists – who can find no meaning in this kind of language – may conclude that on rare occasions our incomprehensible universe redeems its pain and conflict through the rare genius of extraordinary people who, for some mysterious reason and well beyond human understanding, are able to forgive the unforgiveable.

It is impossible, sadly, to codify this miraculous forgiveness in any systematic way to resolve the wrenching problems that inflict our times. We could of course pray for the arrival of a Mandela figure who might enable us to rise high above our miseries and violent hatreds. But history indicates that usually so complex are the conflicts that entangle us, and usually so unsubtle are the ways in which we respond to them, that all we sadly end up with is the mantra of an “eye for an eye”. Then we invent more weapons and recruit our armies as the problems morph and spiral helplessly into conflicts.

“...failure of forgiveness.”



Magnanimity and Mercy

We should remember the healing power of mercy towards a beaten enemy. In a famous speech on conciliation with America in 1775, philosopher and politician Edmund Burke said “Magnanimity in politics is not seldom the truest wisdom”. Of course magnanimity can break the cycle of revenge, but it’s rare. Yet after a great conflict, magnanimity can check the likelihood of further violence. In William Manchester’s book on Churchill, *The Last Lion*, he points out a clear example of failure of forgiveness.

In the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918,

Churchill was standing in his office waiting for Big Ben to chime to signify that the Great War had ended. Churchill listened to the cheering of the crowds but felt no jubilation. Since 1914, Britain had suffered 908,371 dead and 2,090,212 wounded, and 191,652 were missing. Victory had been “bought so dear it was indistinguishable from defeat.”

Clementine Churchill suggested the couple go to Downing Street to congratulate Lloyd George, the then prime minister, on the victory.

Those already present were discussing calling a general election. Churchill interrupted by saying that the “fallen foe” was near starvation. He proposed sending a dozen ships crammed full of provisions to Hamburg: this proposal was coldly rejected.

Manchester tells us that while Churchill’s suggestion was being rebuffed by his unforgiving colleagues, a twice-decorated German non-commissioned despatch rider, temporarily blinded by a gas attack on 13 October 1918, sat in a Pomeranian military hospital and learned the detail of Germany’s plight from a sobbing pastor.

Six years later, the soldier wrote a description of his reaction to the event: “All was lost. Only fools and criminals could hope for mercy from the enemy. In these nights, hatred grew in me, hatred for those responsible for the deed... and the more shame and disgrace burned my brow... in the days that followed, I resolved to go into politics.”

The soldier’s name was Adolf Hitler.

Mourning Sickness

20 September — Day 13: Charlbury

It's the penultimate day, and what glorious weather we had.

We started the day with a delightful new group of walkers, including one couple who have walked with us – and map-read with great accuracy – nine times!

There were two dogs with us again, so Moses ran at least twice the stated distance.

Lunch was at a middling pub – the landlord apologised for being “rushed off his feet because it’s Sunday!” But for goodness sake, Sundays occur at regular intervals – at least every seven days – so why do they take him by surprise?

A Coward's Way Out

The other dog got randy and started to ravish the nearest walking leg. We had a boy with us, aged seven (who was walking us off our feet). His weary father tried to explain what the dog was doing.

It reminded me of Noel Coward’s explanation to a godchild concerning two mating dogs: “Dear boy, obviously the front dog is blind and his kind friend is pushing him all the way to St Dunstan’s.”

We moved on to discussing the mawkish coverage of individual deaths in the BBC’s reports on Covid.

We all think it overdone and in poor taste. But then, of course, we’re an old-fashioned bunch. The war generation dealt with death rather differently.

Recreational Grief

Do you recall the answer given by the Duke of Edinburgh when asked by a reporter how he felt on receiving the news of the murder of his uncle Lord Mountbatten?

You can’t? That’s not surprising because no journalist dared to ask such a drivelling question.

“Loss and grief were personal matters.”

In 2012, the wonderful *Daily Telegraph* journalist Cassandra Jardine – a good friend to ZANE – died of cancer, leaving five distraught children. Her husband, actor William Chubb, played his theatre role on the evening of her death. He knew the show must go on, for that’s exactly what sensible Cassandra would have wanted. The family could mourn deeply later and of course in private with close friends and colleagues. They understood the value of a stiff upper lip. To them loss and grief were personal matters.



Fast forward to when I was chairman of a health authority board. A number of staff decided they were too grief-stricken to do their job because of the Gulf War. Not that they had family involved mind, they were just too distressed to work. I wondered to my chief executive what would have happened if the Battle of Britain pilots had been too distressed by the death of their friends to fight? But I was told that if I had summarily dismissed the absent workers – as I proposed to do – I would lose the sympathy of the entire 2,000 staff. On reflection, he was right not to be too hard on

“...faces like broken bedpans.”

them; in recent times, we have been conditioned to believe that it is right, even proper, to indulge our emotions. They probably felt virtuous for having done so.

How Are You Feeling?

Letting it all hang out is now the thing. But I am of an older generation, and I can't bear to watch the ghastly sentimentality and

unremitting vulgarity of today's news. And it's not just the token politicians with faces like broken bedpans

reciting the mantra, "Our prayers are with the families" that appal me, it's worse than that.

Today's culture demands that for public titillation the media must squeeze the maximum amount of recreational grief from any disaster. And the deaths from Covid present a glorious opportunity.

Death is no longer a family matter but paraded as a public spectacle. So foot-in-the-door reporters nightly feed on the misery of stricken families and ask loved ones to express their "feelings" at the death of Granny, or whoever it is that has died. They dwell on emotion, the more harrowing the better, and they encourage its indulgence. The cameras probe relentlessly to uncover raw grief, pain, shock and as many tears as possible. The obscene intrusion is justified as "caring" and "compassionate" when in fact it's the exact opposite. When the reporters have gone, the families are left empty and despairing.

The sadness is that the public have striven to accommodate the media's desire to provide them with this sort of emotional pornography. Tell people they should feel something, and they'll not only feel it, they'll regard themselves as entitled and obliged to feel it. So the bereaved weep and lament and feel a flattering importance whilst enjoying their brief five minutes of fame.

George McDonald Fraser – author of the excellent *Quartered Safe Out Here* – describes life as a private soldier in Field Marshal Lord

Slim's 14th army in Burma during the Second World War: violent death, of course, was an everyday occurrence. Fraser wishes we could be transported back in time to hear a modern television journalist ask members of his platoon for their "feelings" after one of their colleagues had just been killed. He would like to have heard their reply.

“...brief five minutes of fame.”

And there's still time to ask the Duke of Edinburgh!

The Truth Will Out...

Jane is a gardener and rightly proud of her talents – to my untutored eye she has created a mini Sissinghurst. Woe betide any suggestions from me. I made the foolish error of proposing that one of our handsome Zimbabwe statues would look good in another part of the garden. She whirled round and rasped, "The trouble is that you're a vulgarian!"

So true.



Factor X

21 September — Day 14: Stonesfield

The last leg had us chasing around Stonesfield through Blenheim, and what a beautiful estate it is, particularly in the September sunshine.

We talked about “racism”. What, we wondered, is a fair definition as the word is so often hurled about in argument as a terminal insult?

I like Martin Luther King’s hope that people should be judged by the content of their character, not the colour of their skin. One walker wondered whether the Scottish nationalists should be accused of racism towards the English. It may sound bizarre, but what else can be the reason why so many Scots are content to give some of their democratic freedoms to the EU but battle to escape the union?

But perhaps “racism” is only white on black?

Femme Fatale

It is alleged that Meghan Markle was chased out of the UK because of racism. Of course there is racism in the UK, but compared to all other countries, the UK is a benign and tolerant place in which to live. I suppose that is why the majority of desperate migrants want to come here and nowhere else. No, the

reasons Meghan left this country have nothing to do with racism.

I wonder whether Meghan will destroy her husband, Harry? Obviously, I hope not, but to my mind the omens are worrying.

Of course, it’s not the first time a man has given up everything for a dream that turns into a nightmare. Let’s start with Yeats’ “Poem to my daughter”:

*May she be granted beauty
and yet not*

*Beauty to make a stranger’s eye
distraught...*

They’re great lines. I am convinced that the way to a happy relationship is not to chase factor X or a femme fatale. Marry a beautiful person, of course, yes, every time – but don’t pursue the type of beauty that Yeats warns us about.

We read a great deal about men’s power – the so-called “patriarchy” where women are dominated by men. But what about the potent power some women exercise over men? This is a power that men don’t have – put simply, the ability to drive a person mad, to derange them. Not just to destroy them but to make them destroy themselves. The sort of power that allows a young woman

to target a man, often at the height of his accomplishments, and torment him, make him behave like a fool and wreck his life utterly for just a few moments of almost nothing.

'Twas ever thus. In the book of Proverbs (7:21–3), we read: “With persuasive words she led him astray; she seduced him with her smooth talk... All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter... little knowing it will cost him his life.”

The Face that Launched a Thousand Ships

So, of course, nothing is new in the dance between the sexes. In ancient times, Helen of Troy was married to Menelaus, King of Sparta. General Paris was so consumed by her beauty that he abducted her, thereby causing

“...a few moments of almost nothing.”

the 10-year Trojan War. Here’s an extract from Christopher Marlowe’s “Dr

Faustus” that captures the electric effect Helen had on poor old Paris:

*Was this the face that launched a thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?*

*Sweet Helen, make me immortal
with a kiss:*

*Her lips suck forth my soul,
see where it flies!*

Paris went mad to get his hands on Helen. Yet when the war ended, she went back to Menelaus. The story should be on Netflix.

And what about Samson and Delilah? She pretended to love him and then she drove him mad with desire for



kinky sex (see Judges 16). Delilah nagged Samson ceaselessly to find the secret of his strength. Finally, coldly and ruthlessly, she sold him to the Philistines, who blinded and destroyed him.

Now fast forward to the early 1930s. The power women have over men can't all be about looks, for Wallis Simpson was no Carey Mulligan, yet she had such an electric effect on Edward VIII that he caused a major constitutional crisis by abdicating his throne.

Then in 1961, Christine Keeler sent Jack Profumo mad. I knew him a little in the early seventies when we both sat on the same committee with Lord Longford. He was a fine man but his brief liaison with Christine destroyed him and was in part responsible for undermining the Macmillan government. (Ever the name-dropper, I must admit to dancing with Christine at the 1962 Sandhurst spring ball – male ZANE supporters, eat your hearts out! However, as apparently Christine was having sexual relations with both the Russian military attaché and the UK Secretary of State for War at roughly the same period, she was somewhat above the pay grade of Officer Cadet Tom Benyon. I assure you, though, she had factors X Y and Z – and it took me some time to recover my equilibrium!)

Princess Diana had factor X in such quantity that she tried – and nearly succeeded – to create a royal court in opposition to that of HM the Queen.

And the majority of men, some admittedly of curious quality, fell helplessly under her spell.

But for all that, factor X is an arbitrary quality. I know a family where a very ordinary-looking woman – to my mind with the looks of a genial horse – had, astonishingly, factor X. She could “pull” men on an industrial scale to the considerable detriment of many marriages in the surrounding district.

Trouble Ahead

And what about Meghan Markle? One of my old vicar friends is hard of hearing; when he heard on the radio that Harry was going to marry her, he told his amazed congregation that Harry was about to marry Angela Merkel: “It will do so much in terms of good will with the EU!”

I'll bet Harry wishes he had married the German chancellor. She would never have towed him away from the job he was good at to a life of burning boats in the UK and who knows what in La La Land.

My worries about Meghan have nothing to do with race. It's just that Meghan comes from a culture that is narcissistic and absorbed with identity politics, that of putting self-interest first at the expense of others. She knows little of self-restraint and the daily grind of duty. She understood nothing of the crucial constitutional importance of the UK monarchy and the unflagging duty of all those who are part of “The Firm”.

She should have talked to Princess Anne, who completes 500 events each year: she would have told Meghan that she now had to restrain her ambition, back the royal family and play a part in the often tedious grind of (for example) opening the Milton Keynes Health Authority's new building. It's often unglamorous, hard work and all participants must put duty first, themselves second.

Instead, Meghan appears wholly self-centred and set on serving her own interests at the expense of poor Harry and all he stands for. For it's Harry who has lost out: Meghan has lost nothing. She has an even more glittering career than she had before as she is now a duchess and she is married to a very rich man. In short, she has won the jackpot.

Harry has lost almost everything. When the gilt comes off the marriage and he sees that he no longer has a role, I think he will be desperate. Of

“Harry has lost almost everything.”

course, I hope I am wrong. But I see trouble ahead and I think this is just the start of the saga.

Back to Helen of Troy. A poet called Lord Dunsany – and no, I had never heard of him before either – wrote a short poem about the legendary beauty. It's called “And Were You Pleased?” I fear it will become Meghan's signature tune...

*“And were you pleased,” they asked
Helen in Hell.*

*“Pleased?” answered she, “when all
Troy's Towers fell;*

*And dead were Priam's sons, and
lost his throne?*

*And such a war was fought as none
had known;*

*And even the gods took part, and all
because*

Of me alone! Pleased?

I should say I was!”

Trial by Twitter

23 September — A Couple of Days After

Now the walk of 143 miles is over, our eleventh walk! The weather was kind to us – in fact it was perfect.

Allow me to share a couple of last thoughts. And if I am denounced for expressing my views, I shall of course demand “counselling” – apparently it’s all the fashion these days!

I was told that my nemesis could come via Twitter. What an extraordinary world we are living in where we are seemingly not permitted to express our views or choose to disagree with one another. It would seem that little has changed since the early seventeenth century.

Doomed!

On 11 April 1612, despite being given the chance to repent at his trial in Lichfield, Edward Wightman was burned as a heretic.

That was said to be the last time. Just think how enlightened we are today. How could our ancestors ever have been so plain stupid and wicked as to kill people because their beliefs were contrary to our own?

Yet 400 years on, we still are condemning people as heretics. At least Wightman had a trial... well,

a trial of sorts. Today on social media, trolls are destroying people’s reputations, careers and livelihoods... without trial. Why? Just because the victims disagree with some arbitrary consensus – usually to do with race or gender – and because it’s such fun to sit in cruel judgement.

Look at what George Orwell wrote: “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.” It appears to have been junked...

Power Play

Today, we all have to conform – or else! I have been warned that my simple blog is a bomb waiting to explode, and if the social media trolls get wind of it, like Dad’s Army “We’re doomed!” It’s ridiculous. I find it hard to believe that we have regressed to the days of Savonarola. But the trolls believe that their “views” make them morally superior to everyone else – and that if you disagree with them, then you are not only lower than vermin, they will destroy your career and livelihood and as publicly as possible to show the world the fate of heretics, just as they did in 1612.

This is monstrous. Today, talented

“...lower than vermin.”

people are running scared of saying anything that could be distorted, because once it's been weaponised by the trolls, employers will be fearful of employing them, commercial firms won't sponsor them, and TV producers will be frightened of hiring them. Who can blame anyone with a living to earn for being terrified? Once careers are destroyed, they stay destroyed.

What's the motive? It's a power play: a controlling minority are just as cruel and vicious and hungry for power now as they were in the days of the Spanish Inquisition. The trolls get their kicks by inflicting cruelty by Twitter: they tap away, anonymous and giggling with glee, safely hiding behind the narrow consensus of "the mob".

That's what happened to actor Laurence Fox. He simply argued on *Question Time* that Meghan Markle may have had grounds other than racism for leaving the UK. He now worries he may never work again. Then the reputations of Germaine Greer, Toby Young, JK Rowling and the late Sir Roger Scruton – to name but a very few – have all been thrown under a bus. An article by journalist Kevin Myers in the *Sunday Times* was purposefully misunderstood: despite the fact he never said what was reported, he was denounced worldwide for misogyny and anti-Semitism, his career destroyed.

At least the "heretic" Edward Wightman was given a trial. That's more than Laurence Fox and the others were granted.



Face Value

People take you at face value and life isn't fair when it comes to faces. In repose, my beloved wife, Jane, has a face that clearly shows the world she's a good and kind person; but in contrast, my face looks like an agitated horse and it's not fair.

When they first meet me, people assume I'm a grumpy sort of guy, but in fact I'm just as nice as Jane. Well, I suppose not quite as nice, for that wouldn't be possible, but at least a great deal nicer than I look. But people are bound to take you at face value; they assume that the way you look reflects character. Oh look, here comes that miserable old git. One look and its judgement day! And usually there's no second chance to show a critical world my true colours.

But I'm sure that looking grumpy is better than being a continual smiler. The vicar of the church I used to attend is an all-the-time smiler: every time you look at him, he's grinning away as if he's just heard some private joke. I find that irritating and it must be difficult for his parishioners. There you are, deserted and penniless with angina and fallen arches, and there's old Fred grinning away as if he's chorusing, "No worries!" Or you're dying of

"I'll settle for looking like a horse."

the dreaded lesser-spotted lurgy and here he comes grinning like a Cheshire cat. Or you're corpsed, the family's in deep mourning, and there's Fred again grinning like a ragtime band to spoil your misery.

On balance, I'll settle for looking like a horse!

Superstar Queen

Our youngest grandson, Raphael Benyon (Raph), took it upon himself to write to the queen as follows:

Dear Your Majesty the Queen,

I am writing to you because I wanted to say "thank you" for being such a brilliant and superstar queen for such a long time.

My two brothers and our little dog, Lottie, have enjoyed playing and doing puzzles with my dad and riding my bike in lockdown. I wonder what you have enjoyed doing?

My family are praying for you in this very strange time. We hope you will be happy and full of hope.

Yours truly,

Raph Benyon, aged 7

Nothing else to be said really, is there?

The views expressed are those of Tom Benyon and not the charity ZANE.

Cartoons by Tony Husband

My Side of the Story

by Jane Benyon

As was the case last year, I once again kept an account of our various walks – and so here is my version of events. This is a straightforward account of the routes we followed, the people we met, and the things we saw along the way (no wandering off topic!), and so I hope it serves to complement Tom's more colourful musings!

Day 1

Cleeve Common

We started our day full of apprehension since the format for this year's walking is so different. All of the walks will be around 10 miles long, and based in Oxfordshire or Gloucestershire. We'll return home each night. The downsides are that we have no backup vehicle to pick us up if anything goes wrong, and no lovely hosts to wine and dine us each night or send us on our way, fortified by a cooked breakfast, the next

morning. However, the upside is that it's quite nice to sleep in our own bed each night!

We were supposed to meet two fellow walkers who cancelled at the last minute. We were, however, joined by our middle daughter, Milly, and her husband, Clayton, along with their dog, Koru, so that was a pure joy.

The start of our walk took us up an extremely steep golf course, which we discovered was the highest point in Gloucestershire!

*I don't think this golf course
can get any tougher, Jane*



We moaned about our son-in-law for starting us off so cruelly though we had to admit the view at the top was stunning. The 360-degree views included Cheltenham, Tewkesbury, Gloucester, south Wales and the Malvern Hills. We talked to a number of disgruntled golfers, who complained that their beloved wild golf course is to close as the clubhouse is being sold to a developer.

Prehistoric earthworks were visible as we walked up the golf course, including a vast neolithic long barrow burial site, built around 3,000 BC.

Leaving the common, we descended into the valley along well-marked tracks. We walked through beech woods, past a stunning house called Sudeley Castle. It was obviously open to the public as we could see people strolling around the gardens. Eventually, we arrived in the charming ancient town of Winchcombe, where we stopped for lunch and were unexpectedly joined by a very good old friend. A happy lunch was had, which lasted far longer than intended! Our route back to the start was uneventful, but the trip took longer than planned and we did not finish until 5.30pm – perhaps we have slowed up since last year! Our new pedometer said we had covered nearly 13 miles although the route said it was 10.6 miles, so that was a bit of a mystery.

Day 2

Chedworth

The day started off badly. Halfway to our start point, I realised I had left behind our GPS navigation system and all we had was a map. It showed a circular route, much of it through forestry, which is always a problem as it means multiple paths veering off in different directions. In my experience, this can be very disorientating and makes it so difficult to ascertain which way you should be going. I prayed we would be joined by walkers with a talent for map reading – not one of my or Tom's particular strengths!

After we met our four companions for the day, my hopes rose as two of them showed an interest in map reading. An Ordnance Survey map was produced, so things were definitely looking up. Leaving the pretty village of Chedworth, we were soon in Chedworth Woods. Sure enough, we were confronted with numerous paths! It's a beautiful deciduous forest with many fine mature beech, oak and ash trees. After a slight detour and a lot of map discussion, we finally found ourselves on the prescribed route. On the edge of the woods was Chedworth Roman Villa, apparently one of the finest in the Cotswolds and owned by the National Trust. Sadly, we didn't have time to visit this second-century home – but according to the guidebook, it comprises many rooms and includes Roman baths and fine mosaics.



We made our way down into the Coln Valley and followed the river into another lovely Cotswold village, Withington. The Mill Inn provided us with a warm welcome and we had a happy lunch in its charming garden. Afterwards, we returned to the forest, now known as Withington Wood. It's obviously a pheasant shooting area, and Moses had a delightful time rushing about and chasing the birds. My feeling is that at this time of year, it does the pheasants no harm and it teaches them to fly! I'm not sure the keeper would agree with me – but Moses is pretty harmless, and the pheasants were perfectly safe.

With the help of our companions, we negotiated our way across an old Second World War airfield back to Chedworth, arriving in good time.

Our pedometers tallied with the length we were supposed to walk today, so this only added to the mystery of yesterday!

Day 3

Wallingford and Cholsey

Today we left the Cotswolds and its rolling hills behind, and headed for the flat country of south Oxfordshire and the ancient town of Wallingford. We drove past the mounds of Wallingford Castle, once one of the strongholds of William the Conqueror and finally destroyed by Oliver Cromwell's army during the Civil War. Apparently, Wallingford once boasted 16 churches, which have now been reduced to six.



The ancient bridge over the Thames is a favourite of mine – we walked towards it on a beautiful summer’s evening last year during our walk from Canterbury to Oxford. This year, however, we missed seeing it as we approached the Thames path on the town side, further down from the bridge. There is something wonderfully soothing about walking beside a slow-moving river. We particularly enjoyed the glimpses of large opulent properties standing back from the water’s edge – though I imagine some of the owners are not too happy about their frontages being a public right of way!

Two miles on, we left the river and headed through the village of Cholsey. We got a bit confused

finding our way under the main railway line and the branch line at the end of the village, and had to do some retracing of steps – which always makes Tom very cross! In all this confusion, we spied a solitary church ahead of us – I’ve since discovered it’s the burial place of Agatha Christie. We headed across country to Aston Tirrold, and then north to South Moreton and back east again to Wallingford. It wasn’t the most inspiring of arable farmland scenery.

Day 4

East Challow, Wantage and Letcombe Bassett

Today, we started off in the car park

of the East Challow village hall and were joined by a long-time supporter of ZANE, who walked with us through Winchester four years ago. He had stayed the night with a friend in Letcombe Regis and brought him along.

Yesterday, I was having difficulties with my satnav, so my son-in-law John – who organises the routes – kindly met us in the car park and sorted me out. What would we do without the help of the younger generation when it comes to technology?

It was a glorious autumn morning, and the sun was shining as we walked along a pretty wooded path by the Wilts & Berks Canal. Sadly the canal is no longer in use and this section was full of stagnant water. I read that there are hopes it will be reclaimed – I wonder if this will ever happen?

The joy was that this pretty route took us right into the centre of the attractive town of Wantage, where we passed the statue of Alfred the Great holding a battle axe in one hand and a manuscript in the other. Not just a great British hero and the father of the British navy, this Anglo-Saxon king also won a major battle against the Danes at Ashdown on the nearby Ridgeway. We made our way down Mill Street, past the small working flour mill called Wessex Mill. Apparently, it provided the flour for Meghan and Harry's wedding cake!

Having left Wantage, we found ourselves at the top of a pretty, steep-sided narrow valley. Below us was an intriguing landscaped garden, at the end of which was a healthy-looking and probably productive vineyard. We had booked lunch at the highly sought-after pub, The Pheasant, in the pretty village of Letcombe Regis, but it was too early to eat – so we had a coffee instead. Our fellow walker knew the publican well, and she kindly put together some sandwiches, which we then ate in the churchyard of Letcombe Bassett three miles further along.

Letcombe Bassett is a charming hamlet of many thatched houses. It's known for its racing yards including the famous Pitman Stables. The horses train on the gallops on the Ridgeway above the village. Thomas Hardy based the village of Cresscombe in *Jude the Obscure* on Letcombe Bassett, and many of the surrounding villages featured in his novels. It was also home to Jonathan Swift in the summer of 1714 – he was reputed to have written parts of *Gulliver's Travels* under a mulberry tree in the Old Rectory garden.

From Letcombe Bassett, we walked due north through large arable fields recently harvested. I gather there has been a poor cereal harvest due to the hot spring and rain in July and August. We arrived back at East Challow, coming along the same redundant canal. It's been a happy day, and we very much enjoyed the excellent company.

Buckland and Faringdon

Another sunny morning although it soon clouded over during the day – at least it remained dry! At Buckland, we were joined by Charles – he has now done three walks with us, which is supportive of him. We set off in good time and made our way out of the village and over the extremely busy A420, taking our lives in our hands to cross it. Tom was rudely hooted at by a woman, which was totally unprovoked. We mused that she must have got up this morning with the cares of the world on her shoulders, sad lady.



The route took us up a well-manicured drive and then past a newly restored hexagonal dovecote,

which apparently is to become a holiday let. The wide track then passed through mature woodland with a canopy of tall and ancient yew trees. Out into the open again, we traversed a golf course and had an easy 6-mile walk to Faringdon. We approached the town via the Faringdon Folly, which sits on top of a hill overlooking the town. According to local history, the Roundheads bombarded the Royalists in the town from this vantage point and captured the town accordingly. The Folly, said to be the last major folly built in England, in 1937, was erected by an eccentric aristocrat called Gerald Tyrwhitt-

Wilson, 14th Baron Berners. He was a colourful character by repute, a talented writer, painter and composer. He wanted to build a huge gothic edifice: however, the architect deplored the idea and built the current more classical tower while his lordship was abroad, much to his fury when he returned!

The last time we visited this pretty old town was during our sponsored walk two years ago, from Bournemouth to Oxford. Even then we felt it had a run-down feel about it, and now we feel that many of the shops and pubs that have closed due to the pandemic are unlikely to open again.

Although people were wandering around, the whole centre felt dead and purposeless. Very depressing.

We had been told that one of the pubs would be open for lunch, but it wasn't – so after buying and eating a quick sandwich in the only open shop we could find, we set off again. The walk back to Buckland was the same one of two years ago, along an escarpment, and we enjoyed the spectacular views across northeast Oxfordshire.

We passed by St Hugh's Prep School with its well-appointed games fields and hard tennis courts, and met a cheerful group of kids in their colourful blue and pink striped sweatshirts. Then it was back across the scary A420 before passing the beautifully manicured gardens of Buckland House and its adjacent park full of thoroughbred horses and pedigree shorthorn cows. Finally, we made our way past the large parish church, and then on to the Catholic church where we had parked.

Day 6

Long Compton and Great Rollright

We arrived at the village hall car park to be greeted by five fellow walkers, all well known to us. Three of them live in the area and know the footpaths well, which was of course a great joy!

Our oldest walker was 90 years old, and had every intention of walking at least half the way. This was a great encouragement to Tom and me to think that we might be able to continue our walks until well into our

eighties. Having looked at the map, it was clear that once again we'd arrive at our lunch stop far too early, so it was decided we'd tackle the walk the other way round.

There was a lot of chatter and laughter as we set off in high spirits. It was a glorious autumn day, with sunny blue skies and wonderful countryside in all directions. We were told that this was an "undiscovered" part of the Cotswolds with very few tourists – it's unlike other parts of Gloucestershire, and long may it remain so.

The problem is that a larger party always progresses much more slowly than a group of two or three. It soon became clear we were not going to make our lunch stop in Long Compton by 2pm when the pub's kitchen closed. Incredibly kindly, our walking friends, who live in the same village, offered to give us lunch in their garden. It was a huge relief and we cancelled our pub booking.

After saying goodbye to our 90-year-old friend, we carried on with our glorious walk, which included a slight detour to visit the Rollright Stones. There are three different groups of standing stones, the Whispering Knights (a burial chamber); the King's Men, a 77-stone circle that was probably a religious meeting place; and a single stone called the King Stone. There is evidence of human habitation in this area from 6,500 BC to the Saxons era around 800 AD. It was certainly worth the detour.

We came down a steep hill to arrive in Long Compton just before 2pm, so our predictions on timing were right. We had a delicious impromptu lunch with our kind friends in their beautiful and colourful garden in the warm sunshine. It was tempting to stay put for the rest of the afternoon. However, our consciences got the better of us, and we set off up a steep hill on the other side of the valley with even more stunning views at the top, arriving back at Great Rollright by 5.30pm. In the car park, we noticed a statue dedicated to eight American airmen whose aircraft had crashed nearby during the Second World War with no survivors. Sadly, there are many such memorials of non-combatant deaths all over Britain from that period.

A day off tomorrow, yipee!

Day 7

Chastleton and Upper Oddington

We thoroughly enjoyed our day off yesterday and felt the better for it. We went to a lovely socially distanced service in the churchyard of Swinbrook Church and then had a delicious lunch cooked by our son-in-law John at his and Clare's Christ Church home in Oxford. Then we had an unexpected visit from a good friend in London for tea. All in all, a perfect rest day.

Today we were joined by four others, a couple of ladies on their own, Mary and Jennifer, and our good friends

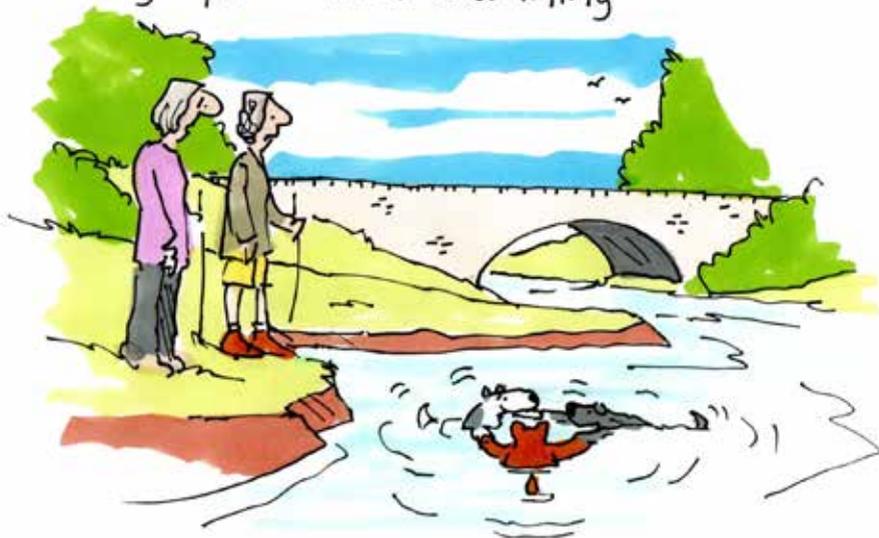
Andrew and Sue along with their two dogs.

It was another lovely day with not a cloud in the sky and the temperature reported to be rising to 27 degrees. We parked our car beside Chastleton Church, where Sue's parents are buried, next to Chastleton House – a fine Jacobean manor house now owned by the National Trust. After climbing a steep hill, we walked well all morning in open countryside enjoying the views. The dogs had a field day rushing about – luckily there were enough puddles and streams to keep them cool. We passed through the immaculately kept Daylesford Estate with its rolling parkland, beautifully manicured paths and what looked like a flourishing stud farm. Then there was the well-known farm shop and restaurant of Daylesford, which is well supported by the well-heeled residents of Gloucestershire and beyond. Business here seems to be thriving again!

Our route took us over the railway line and river, with a chance for the dogs to swim. Then it was on into Upper Oddington and a much-needed rest at the pub. It's tiring walking in the heat! Mary and her little dog left us here.

Our trip back to Chastleton was uneventful apart from a slight detour to avoid walking through fields of horses. All in all, another enjoyable day.

You're right Mary... they are doing synchronised swimming



Day 8

Bourton-on-the-Water and Naunton

Today we met up with three walkers, Christopher, Dicky and Richard, a brother and sister plus her husband. We heard with amazement that Dicky had already completed an hour-long bike ride with a friend this morning. We were going to have to be on our metal to keep up!

Our good friend David, who lives in the village, waved us off. He hoped to join us later in the week. Bourton-on-the-Water was already bustling with tourists as we walked down the high street. We made our way through a churchyard with rather a strange church – it seemed to have a pretty Norman front and then a rather ugly Victorian tower that didn't quite

blend in with the rest of the building. We were soon out of the village, walking alongside a pretty woodland stream before arriving in Lower Slaughter. I have never visited here before, but it must be one of the most picturesque of the Cotswold villages. Every house and cottage is a little gem with the stream and footbridges adding to one's romantic imagination of seventeenth-century village life.

Unfortunately, my satnav played up as we left the village and I inadvertently took a wrong turn up a very steep hill. I only realised my mistake halfway up, so there was a very disgruntled Tom as we retraced our steps! The route we should have been on took us through beautiful meadows. In one field, we were treated to the charming sight of

three mares with their foals, two of them flat out sunbathing. We crossed the stream into Upper Slaughter – perhaps not quite as picturesque as Lower Slaughter, but still pretty.

We now turned west and made our way to Naunton, another lovely village that one senses is not on the tourist trail. It has an excellent pub, The Black Horse. There is a well-known racing yard nearby, and we met a couple of jockeys, one of whom is the nephew of one of our walking companions. We were met by a dear man called Ralph, a ZANE supporter who had driven his motorbike all the way from Monmouth. He brought his ZANE banner, which he uses to fundraise locally.

The journey back to Bourton was along the river Windrush. I had imagined we would be wandering through the valley beside the river but unfortunately not. Our route took

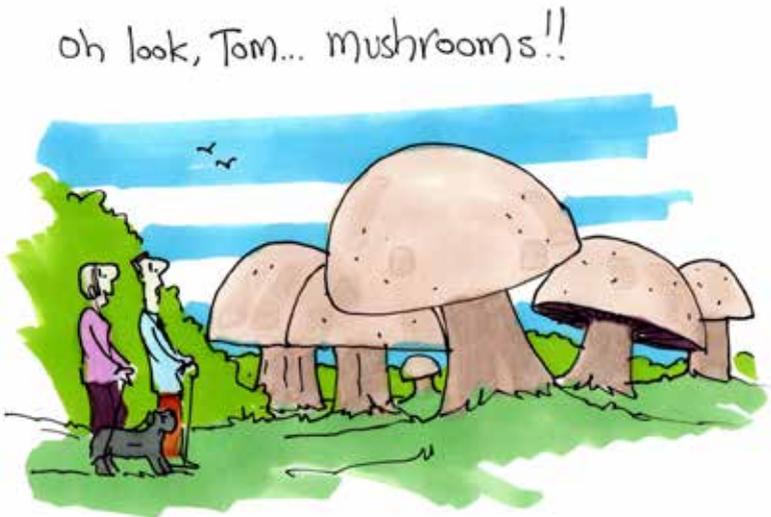
us through the forest above, with lots of undulating paths. It was a bit of a strain on our tired, hot bodies, although nice to be in the cool of the forest canopy. Away from the wood, we walked across rough grass fields, and I was thrilled to find field mushrooms, which we very much enjoyed eating for breakfast.

We arrived back in Bourton by 5pm.

Day 9

Charlton-on-Otmoor and Noke

Today our walk took us through the rather desolate and mysterious landscape of Otmoor to the east of Oxford. It's a canvas of fields and hedgerows that seems to have been bypassed by the rest of the country. A curious, ghostly stillness pervades the wilderness, which has been romantically described by various writers as “the forgotten Otmoor”,





“bewitched Otmoor” and “sleeping Otmoor” – it’s a place seemingly cast under the spell of ancient magic.

We met up with a number of fellow walkers at Charlton-on-Otmoor. Some of them seemed to know the area well, which brought us hope that it wouldn’t be the day we got lost! The countryside is flat, having been marshland until it was drained for farming in 1820. This was heavily resisted by the inhabitants of the time, with riots occurring in Oxford. Lewis Carroll was supposedly inspired by the view of the primitive 4,000-acre landscape to write of the giant chessboard in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, and John Buchan also wrote about it in detail in his novel *The Blanket of the Dark*.

Many of the tracks we followed were along wide pathways with

ditches on either side – apparently an ornithologist’s and butterfly specialist’s heaven. We crossed the new Oxford-Marylebone line on a number of occasions, the first time having to find our way to a new bridge as the right of way is closed due to the new railway. Arriving at the attractive village of Islip, we were surprised to find both its pubs closed due to Covid. We had a pleasant, sunny picnic sitting on a wall under a beautiful oak tree outside the large parish church.

Our afternoon walk progressed along similar lines. The RSBP apparently owns a large section of this area and has allowed many of the drainage ditches to revert back to marshland to encourage the birds and other wildlife. We walked through the tiny hamlet of Noke and were met

by my good friend Mary and her husband, Allan, who had driven out from Oxford to wish us well. Further along, we were furious to find an official metal kissing gate tied up with a cable tie. With great difficulty, Tom and I managed to climb over it – and then one of our companions gave the gate a little push and it simply opened, much to the amusement of everyone else!

Later on, we were stopped from continuing along our prescribed path by a barrier that is lowered when the military rifle range is in use. We could hear the shooting in the distance. The detour took us back to our start point rather sooner than planned.

Day 10

Leaffield and Finstock

We approached Leaffield down a very narrow lane with an incredibly poor surface – it amazed us that this is the direct route to this village from the main road. Today, we met up with Josey, as well as her daughter and niece. Josey lives in the village, so we were off to a good start. According to her, Leaffield used to be in the middle of Wychwood Forest with no metal roads leading to it. It was considered to be a lawless place, much looked down upon by its neighbours. It's not clear when this part of the forest was removed and farming took over. Wychwood Forest now sits north of the village so it wasn't part of our route today.



Much of the walk took us along wide, tree-lined grass tracks hemmed in by old stone walls – I imagine they were the original routes into the village. We crossed the Witney-to-Charlbury road, which was closed due to a serious car accident. There were two ambulances at the scene and we sent up an arrow prayer for those involved. The route meandered through an ancient woodland, once part of Wychwood Forest, and then past the Lady Well – which according to folklore was where the local women came to perform fertility rights. We arrived at The Plough at Finstock, where we were warmly welcomed by the publican. Our good friend David met us here for the afternoon's walk.

Refreshed from our break, the route back to Leafield down the Roman road (now called the Wychwood Way) seemed straightforward. It is certainly very straight! The only quibble we had was with the local farmer who had recently ploughed up the right of way near Leafield. It made walking difficult, particularly for hot, tired legs.

Day 11

Chadlington and Churchill

It was another glorious day, although a bit colder due to a keen wind at the start. We were eight walkers today, so Charles and Angela, who had already walked four days with us, agreed to leave earlier and be our trailblazers. They have very kindly

been gathering sponsors for their walks on our behalf. I realised this morning that we must now have walked well over 100 miles since the start as we only have four more walks to do, and they have all been about 10 miles long.

Walking up old grass lanes, we spied a huge new house to our left. According to one of our walkers, it was built by and belongs to Jeremy Clarkson. Quite a pile for a new build! I have to admit it has a stunning view, though it's rather exposed at the moment. Hopefully, he has planted trees to soften it a bit. At least it's in Cotswold stone, so it blends in quite well. We walked along the ridge above the house, and on this amazingly clear day, we could see for miles. This was not hilly countryside like some of the places where we've recently walked. The gently undulating landscape provided us with huge vistas in all directions.

We saw the imposing tower of All Saints Church in Churchill standing on a hill long before we reached the village. It's a scaled-down version of the tower of Magdalen College in Oxford. As the choristers of that famous establishment sing from the tower at dawn every May Day, so too does the choir of All Saints! The church was built in 1826 by James Langston, a mover and shaker in the village at the time. We admired the impressive gargoyles at the top of the tower. I'm not sure if these too are replicas of those at Magdalen

Yes, I've been coming here for 250 years
and that view hasn't changed



College. We stopped and had the best lunch of the trip so far at the Chequers Inn – fantastic food in pleasant surroundings.

We set off again in high spirits and walk through the Sarsden Estate, a large beautifully kept and privately owned establishment. Unfortunately, the house was not visible from our path. At the end of the estate is a recently cleared wooded area with a number of headstones to dogs and an imposing stone seat dedicated to a previous owner of the land in 1870 – apparently, he enjoyed the view that we could enjoy today. We mused that this landscape must have been the same for hundreds of years, not a road or electric pylon in sight. The walk ended with another very straight lane, probably a Roman road, taking us back to our start point in Chadlington.

Day 12

Stonesfield and Finstock

Today we got to walk in more familiar territory as Stonesfield is well known to us – we've done a number of walks from here and it's also home to the excellent garage we use. Joining us were our daughter Clare, our son-in-law John – who organises all the routes and puts them on the satnav – and their good friend Alannah. With them was their little cockapoo, Layla. She's Moses' best friend, so their greeting was chaotic and very noisy. Our friend Jane – who walked with us earlier in the week – joined us again, which was a joy.

Stonesfield is best known for the famous Jurassic slate extracted from the surrounding landscape and unique to this part of the country.

It was of very high quality. As well as being used for roofing many local houses in Oxfordshire, it was also used by most Oxford colleges.

The start of our walk took us through a beech wood leading down to the Evenlode river. It's a popular swimming and picnic place for locals, and much loved by our dogs, who enjoy swimming there after sticks. Afterwards we set off through rough pasture, much used by dog walkers, and eventually crossed the railway line and river to arrive in the village of Finstock. We were there two days ago, and enjoyed another good lunch at the Plough Inn, warmly welcomed by the publican. We will be there again tomorrow.

Our afternoon walk was through some beautiful mixed woodland, much of it along the side of the Evenlode river. The effect of the slate quarrying could be detected on the bank opposite our path. It's now covered by grass, but the lines of quarried stone are still visible. Apparently, the last mine was closed before the First World War. We arrived back at the swimming place and walked up the very narrow and steep rocky path, back to the village. On our left was a well-maintained conservation area providing some interesting plants, including some rare orchids earlier in the year.

It was another lovely day's walking, made even better by good company.

Day 13

Charlbury and Finstock

Today we started off in one of my favourite small towns, Charlbury. It's a quintessentially English village of lovely Cotswold stone houses. By the side of the Evenlode, it looks over Cornbury Park to Cornbury House. We met our fellow walkers at the station car park.

Two of our ZANE trustees joined us today, as well as Tim and his two boys aged seven and nine. The youngest did the first half of the walk and swapped with his older brother at lunch. We stayed with Tim and his wife two years ago on our walk from Bournemouth to Oxford. The boys fell in love with Moses then, and they were excited to see him again (apparently having talked about him ever since!) The pressure on their parents to get a similar dog is now running high as Moses came up trumps for them again. I promised to see if I can track down Moses' breeders to find out if they are still having puppies. Loyal Charles and Angela joined us again, setting off early so as not to break the rule of six.

Walking along a lane above the Evenlode river, we passed through the tiny hamlet of Walcot. Apparently it was much larger in its hey-day. We eventually entered the largest section of Wychwood Forest. It was a royal hunting ground, a place where deer were preserved for the king's use – a status symbol for the Norman monarchy. We had a glorious walk

along wide grassy rides surrounded by beautifully preserved mature deciduous and evergreen trees. One can imagine the royal hunting parties galloping along the wide tracks. We glimpsed some of the man-made lakes by Cornbury House and a touching burial chamber overlooking the nearest lake – it was erected after the death of a disabled son of the then Earl of Danby. Emerging from the forest, we passed along a wide track to Finstock and had another lunch at the Plough Inn. They are getting to know us well!

Then it was off again into the business park, all part of the Cornbury Estate, and past the well-stocked trout fishing lakes seen earlier. Here we bumped into Andrew, who walked with us on Monday, back from fishing with his grandson. We then passed along the side of a huge deer park teeming with very attractive Sika and Fallow deer. The footpath took us around the side of the two imposing lodges leading to Cornbury House, which can be seen from a distance up a long straight drive. Crossing the Evenlode river back into Charlbury, we passed the beautiful Georgian house belonging to the Duke of Marlborough – it can be glimpsed through the yew trees on the side of the road. Then it was back to our cars at the station for fond farewells to our friends.

Day 14

Stonesfield, Coombe and Blenheim

Our last walking day was met with a sense of euphoria mixed with sadness. It's been a surprisingly happy two weeks, meeting up with old friends and making new ones. Charles and Angela joined us again – Charles has completed nine walks, and Angela seven, which is a brilliant effort. And where would we have been without Charles's map-reading skills? They were especially helpful during the first week when my satnav and I were having some issues. David joined us too, having left Paddington at 6.30am and having had a nightmare journey as the buses and trains did not coincide as planned. He finally arrived by taxi from Woodstock bang on 9.30am.

This was a walk familiar to us, having completed it on a number of occasions over the years. Our route took us down a steep path to the river, the same one we walked up on Friday. We crossed over the river this time and headed to the second-century Roman villa in North Leigh. As well as having visible foundations, this substantial dwelling also has a building with a well-preserved mosaic floor. It was occupied until the fifth century AD. We didn't have the time to linger here today, and continued on under the railway line, across another wooden bridge over the Evenlode, and into the village of Coombe. The centre of the village has a large green, including a cricket

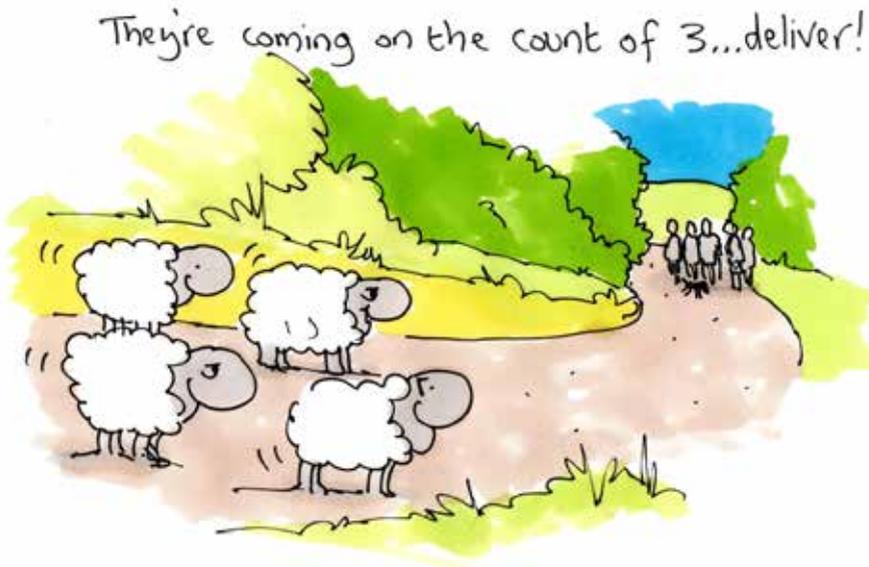
pitch and open grassland. At the end of the village, we were intrigued by a little thatched cottage that had recently been extended to more than twice its size by adding a huge glass-roofed room as well as a large building extension. We were amazed at how they got planning permission!

Off the road, we walked over to the Blenheim Estate exterior wall, climbing a ladder into the park. This is a stunningly beautiful area of old woodland dispersed by wide lush grass rides similar to those we walked down yesterday in Cornbury Estate. Blenheim was also once a royal hunting ground, the land extending from its present location as far as Swindon. The current park was designed by Capability Brown in the eighteenth century for the first Duke of Marlborough after his victory at the Battle of Blenheim.

Walking down the north drive to the gate, we looked back at the fine view of the imposing column of victory with the duke's image on top. This part of the park was full of sheep – and most of them seemed to have chosen to defecate on the tarmac making walking a touch hazardous.

We walked to the Duke of Marlborough pub for lunch and then returned to the park to the Akeman Street Roman road. It took us back over the wall and on to Stonesfield in a very straight line. Moses enjoyed a final swim, chasing sticks in competition with a three-legged Labrador. The Labrador won most of the time, despite his disability!

Then it was up the steep path to the village – a good final day! We are both feeling a sense of loss that it is all over, as well as a big sense of relief that we have done it!



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