

Jane's Walk 2024 – Day 1

As Tom is now over eighty and I am reaching that age rapidly, we needed, once again, to find a walk that was reasonably flat with not too many hills to contend with. Our driver Richard, born in Shropshire, suggested looking at the Severn Way. The Severn is the longest river in Britain, 215 miles long, and although a large part of it is in Wales and therefore hilly and thus out of the question, further south into Shropshire, it becomes a wide meandering waterway. We started our 2024 walk at Upper Arley, on the border of Shropshire and Worcestershire.

Upper Arley, like many of the towns in Shropshire, originated due to the mining for coal and stone quarrying since the Middle Ages. Much of the stone used for the building of Worcester Cathedral was transported down the river from here.

We start our walk by crossing the river on a metal pedestrian bridge, which replaced a 19th-century bridge in 2009. I am intrigued by thousands of padlocks attached to the latticed sides of the bridge all with personal love messages on them. Apparently, these are called "Love Locks" and are very popular. I have never come across them before. Very strange!

We travel along the east side of the river on a good path through the woodland at the end of the ancient Wyre Forest, thought to have been a vast forested area stretching back to Roman times and used as a royal hunting ground. We cross under the Victoria railway bridge built in 1861 and at that moment we had the thrill of seeing a beautifully restored steam passenger train cross the bridge with the iconic smell and sound of steam travel which brought back memories of childhood. The line is now used by the Severn Valley Steam Railway. The bridge was built by John Fowler, who designed much of the London Underground and his name is emblazoned on its side.

The river here is wide and slow-moving but can be subjected to flooding, and the path's erosion in places is evidence of this. We chat to a charming man in his tiny cottage, which is off-grid. He pays £100 rent a year for the privilege and seems extremely happy with his lot.

We stop for lunch along the waterfront in the beautiful town of Bewdley, bustling with people on this bank holiday Monday. In the 18th century, Bewdley became an important trading centre for the Midlands, with cargo coming up from Bristol. Fine Georgian houses are found along the narrow medieval streets of the old town.

Another pleasant walk to Stourport past the local reservoir and a large park hosting a funfair for the bank holiday weekend. Stourport is another significant town built solely due to the construction of the Staffordshire & Worcester Canal, where it meets the Severn River. The town then became the busiest inland port in the Midlands apart from Birmingham. By 1780 it had rapidly expanded into a thriving manufacturing hub.

Jane's Walk 2024 – Day 2

We spent a lovely evening in Worcester with ZANE supporters who had kindly accommodated us in 2013 when we walked from Holyhead to Oxford and again in 2015 from Ambleside to Oxford and here we are again!

Another dry slightly overcast day is forecast which is perfect for walking. Our friends of yesterday meet us again and we leave the marina at Stourport which is teeming with motor pleasure boats. Yesterday, despite the bank holiday, we had not seen any on the river. We pick up the Severn Way just past the marina.

This area rather reminded us of walking through a mangrove swamp in Africa with lots of standing water, dead and dying trees, and lush vegetation, mainly created by the intruder Himalayan Balsam, which has a rather pretty pea-like pink flower. There was another smaller version with an orange flower in this stretch.

We are rather disquieted by the state of the paths, covered with fallen branches which makes progress difficult. This does not bode well for the rest of the walk. However further on, the path clears and progress is easy with steep wooded cliff to our left and the river far below us.

After a while we leave the woodland behind and join the river again. Past the Lincombe Lock we begin to see a number of barges go by but no pleasure boats as yet. Caravan parks are popular here and we walk through a number of them, some of them in a very neglected state with lots of mobile homes neglected and empty. We come across one inhabited home with tiny goats in a fenced area and chickens strutting around.

We arrive at Holt Fleet bridge, which we have to cross, and have lunch at the large Holt Fleet Inn, which has recently spent a fortune to attract customers with its numerous eating facilities, both outside and inside.

Here the Severn Way leaves the river and we walk through farming country to the small hamlet of Holt. A very peaceful and charming place with a lovely 18th century Manor House built round a much older tower which is all that remains of Holt Castle. Opposite is a lovely red stone Norman Church.

Leaving Holt behind us the path takes us through a retail park selling every size of caravan and mobile home you could imagine, rather incongruous in this rural area.

Then on through farmland including a field of spring onions being harvested by hand by a team of pickers. Through the unfortunately named, but pretty villages of Grimes and back to the river and our stopping place at the Camp House pub. This is an ancient pub having been licensed by Cromwell after the battle of Worcester in 1651. It gets flooded inside every winter and according to the publican this winter 2023/24 this happened 3 times. After a welcome drink we were picked up by our hosts for the night.

Jane's Walk 2024 – Day 3

Another fine morning and our progress looks to be good as, according to the publican of the pub, the path was clear. After about an hour along a wooded path we have to contend with a broken footbridge without much difficulty. A bit further on I receive a call from Richard who had investigated a footpath closure sign at the Worcester end of the path, to discover that a metal barrier was blocking access.

After much discussion we have to retrace our steps along a farm track which eventually takes us on to the main road. We were annoyed that this diversion was well signed at one end but nothing at the other. The upkeep of the Severn Way appears to be excellent in some areas but dire in others.

Back on our rightful route we make good progress into Worcester and cross the river into the centre over a comparatively new pedestrian bridge. We stop for lunch in the Cathedral cafe where we meet up with an old friend and afterwards have a short visit to the Cathedral. A lovely experience.

An easy walk along the river front of the city, past beautifully kept gardens with houses set well back from potential flooding, most owning expensive river boats moored on the river bank below. Past a double lock geared for larger boats at Worcester port but no substantial boats visible.

We are soon out of town initially on well-maintained paths. The Severn Way signage then points us down rather alarming wooden steps into a wooded area. The path disappears and we have to negotiate a fallen tree over a steep ravine, Moses having shown us how to do this with ease on a number of occasions with the benefit of 4 legs! We are rather proud of ourselves that we managed without too much difficulty but curious why the signage was so inaccurate when we eventually re found the right path.

We pass the yacht club where we meet a delightful man who started an environmental charity in Worcester. He tells us that he is constantly battling with the local authority about the state of their footpaths and promises to investigate the signage in the place we encountered our difficulty.

The last hour is rather monotonous along the river with visibility blocked by endless Himalayan Balsam. I think we are all tired after a number of hiccups during the day. We are pleased to arrive at the end at Oak farm where we are met by our hosts who we are staying for the next 2 days.

Jane's Walk 2024 – Day 4

Moses shows no desire to walk today having got out of the car reluctantly holding up his front leg and insisting he had a problem. We decide to leave him with Richard as we are walking along the road and he will bring him later if he recovers.

Leaving Oak Farm, our route takes us not back to the river path, which in this section takes

a wide loop, but we take the road to Clifton and on to the Cromme Estate. Cromme House is now owned by the National Trust but the land is farmed by various tenant farmers.

The footpath takes us past various lakes formed from gravel pits which are teeming with water fowl and there are numerous horses grazing in the area. The whole place appears very chaotic with many of the metal gates tied up with binder twine and fences secured by wooden boards which makes access difficult despite it being a prescribed footpath. Long strips

of the land have been sparsely planted with sunflowers which appeared to be under planted with barley but was possibly last years crop.

We take a wrong route into a property and are told very firmly to return the way we had come by the owner of a large white Palladian house who caught us while working on his roof!

We retrace our steps with our tail between our legs as apparently this section of the Severn Way had been closed for several years although the signs were not clear. We continue the right detoured way to Severn Stoke where we stop for lunch with our hosts. Our hostess then joined us on the final stretch of the walk.

After negotiating the detour along the A38 we return to the river through pleasant farmland. Nearing Upton on Severn we come across a number of working gravel pits and watch diggers scooping a mixture of gravel and sand and placing it in shutes into barge to be transported downriver. It was interesting seeing how close the plimsoll lines were to the water was when the boats were full!

We arrive at the pretty medieval town of Upton on Severn and cross the river. This had previously been destroyed in the Civil War Battle of Upton in 1651 as had the church near by leaving only the tower still standing. Back to our very comfortable destination with our kind host. A shorter walk today but good to have a more relaxed afternoon in their lovely home.

Jane's Walk 2024 – Day 5

Back to Upton and we walk out of this pretty small town on the west side of the river. It is an incredibly beautiful morning with not a cloud in the sky or any wind. We are glad we have started early as it will be very hot later.

We walk along the river, which is wider and slower moving on this stretch. We are beside vast flood plains, which are usually flooded in the winter, as are many of the houses nearby! This particular area is a conservation zone, noted for its wild flowers in spring and not cut until late July. We make good progress as the path is open and the gates and stiles in good condition. We arrive in the area where the sand and gravel that we watched being quarried and loaded onto boats yesterday are separated and distributed to different destinations. We watch while one of the loaded barges arrive and the gravel sand mixture is unloaded by a large crane into a hopper and then moved to the top of the hill. A very quick and professional process.

A couple of large fields have cows and calves in them and we have to give them a wide birth, but all is well.

We soon see the tower of Tewksbury Abbey in the distance and arrive at the bridge which we cross and walk to the Abbey to have some lunch and have a look around this beautiful and peaceful abbey before returning home for our day off tomorrow and to enjoy the company of all our children and grandchildren who are meeting up this weekend. All 21 of us!

Jane's Walk 2024 – Day 7

We had a wonderful day off back in Oxford, celebrating a family get-together at our daughter's house—all 21 of us!

Back to Tewkesbury Abbey on Sunday morning, walk through the rest of the town, and back down to the river. We pass footpaths signs to the 'Battle Trail', which takes you to the sight of the Battle of Tewkesbury, where Edward 1V in 1471 defeated the Lancasters, in a famous battle during the Wars of the Roses.

On the riverfront, we walk past Cheltenham College Boat house and are intrigued by a sign saying, "No fishing for Elvers without a license". I had never heard of them, but apparently, they are small eels found in the Severn and are a great culinary delicacy, with many exported to Japan.

An easy start to the day through more flood plains on the east side of the river. On our route, we see the village of Deerhurst to our left with the huge Saxon Church of St Mary's, which is considered to be one of the finest complete buildings in England to have survived from before the Norman Conquest and parts of it may date back to the first part of the 9th century.

500 yards further along, we visit Odda's chapel, which is one of the most complete Saxon Churches in England and was built by Earl Odda, in commemoration of his brother Aelfric, who died in 1053. For many centuries, this chapel was lost inside a rambling Tudor farmhouse known as Abbots Court; the nave had been made into a kitchen, the chancel a bedroom. Its significance was realised in 1865, and in 1965, the chapel was disentangled the house, leaving a very special space to visit.

Through a wooded area, which would be extremely treacherous in wet weather, with steps up and down the path that are in poor condition due to rotting wood. Tom has a tumble, tripping over a root, but all is well.

Further on, we pass to the left of Appeley Court and note the many wooden holiday homes built on very high stilts against the floods. We cross under a road bridge and meet the publican of the local pub walking his tiny Shetland pony. He shows us its many tricks with pride.

We lunch outside at the Red Lion Inn and then complete the day without incident except for negotiating our way around a herd of young cattle and one lone sheep.

Jane's Walk 2024 – Day 8

Moses and I started on our own as Tom had to go into Gloucester to shop for something. All started well, and I even listened to Beethoven on my AirPods as we made good progress along a well-maintained path.

I then came to a field of cattle, all standing around the exit gate at the far end. As I was on my own with a dog, I thought I would not take any chances, so I exited through gates over a brook into the field above. Sure enough, they were young, and they all charged over to me just after I secured the gate and crossed a bridge over a brook. I now had a dilemma as I needed to get back to the path but had to get back over the brook. There were more young cattle in the next field as well, who were equally interested in Moses and me. All the adjoining metal field gates were locked, and I had to persuade Moses that he could crawl under them, much to his reluctance.

Eventually, I had to abandon returning to the path and managed to get onto a road and walk back to the Severn Way. Tom had joined me by then, but the footpath was totally inaccessible here, and we had to remain on the road as we approached Gloucester.

There is something rather depressing about our walk into the city. It has a rather run-down feel about it. We pass the remains of the Llanthony Secunda Priory on the edge of a busy main road. In the 16th Century, it was one of the largest and richest priories in the country, owning 97 churches and 57 well-appointed Manor houses between Bedford and the west coast. We walk through the docks, which have recently been redeveloped with a number of shops and hotels on the waterfront, but according to our host last night, it hasn't really attracted the people as yet.

With difficulty, we find the Severn Way footpath out of the city, which is picked up at the back of a small industrial Estate on the outskirts of the city. This proves to be a very unused path of long, tusky grass, which makes walking difficult.

For the next 1.5 hours, our track takes us along a very unremarkable, featureless route, with the river hidden to the right by willows and a bank on our left. The only remarkable thing about this area is that all along this bank are metal bins, some dustbin-sized, others bigger with what looked like electric switchboards beside them. At one point, two white vans appeared over the bank with National Grid on their sides. Neither Tom nor I had a clue what they were doing, and they were too far away to ask.

After a long and tiring trudge, Richard was able to meet us with a late picnic, which we ate in the car before finishing the further 1.5 miles along a rather more open track to the end at Stone Bench.

This has proved to be our least enjoyable day so far.

Jane's Walk 2024 – Day 9

We are joined today by our host from two nights ago, whom we picked up from his home.

It is overcast and with what the Scots would call a fine mizzle. We walk down the road and get a strong whiff of sewage from the river. We have been told that the Severn becomes tidal in this area, and sure enough, the moment we arrive by the river, we experience the change when the tide starts to come in.

On a high tide, this creates the Severn Bore, a large wave, sometimes 20ft high, moving up the estuary through the narrow stretch of the river at this point, and it is a favourite pastime of people surfing along this wave. Today's tide is not like that, but I do see a small wave arriving, and suddenly, the river is running fast upstream, bringing with it logs and other debris. Quite exciting to see.

We meet a chap working on his digger, moving stones. He tells us he has lived around here all his life, and he and his mates used to ride the Severn Bore long before it became a popular pastime. He also confirmed, when we mentioned the smell of sewage, that the water board in Gloucester was continuously pumping sewage into the river, especially at times of heavy rain, and he would certainly never swim in it now.

Today is a very pleasant walk beside the river with an easy path along the top of the bank, built because of flooding. This is much more impressive farming country, with healthy crops of maize, harvested cereals and dairy cows. Richard has spoken to a farmer and learnt that his dairy farm has a self-milking parlour with all the cows wearing special collars, allowing them to get milked when it suits them and their individual yields monitored electronically. Apparently their yield is higher this way.

The river levels have risen noticeably with the incoming tide.

We come across a tiny, boarded-up cottage with a flat piece of ground in front of it. An old wooden notice on the house says, "This is private property. Anyone playing cricket or football will be prosecuted by order of the Ham Committee." This is miles from any village. I wonder who the Ham committee was, what they did, and why they were so anti-ball games.

Gradually, the tide was turning, and the river was flowing south again. The river is now far wider as it becomes the Severn Estuary, covered with sand banks in the low tide, which is teeming with birds, mainly Black Backed Gulls. We stop in a very rural pub on the river, mostly frequented by the local farming community.

After lunch, we have a very pleasant walk along the raised bank beside the river. Past a number of small holdings, with ponies, donkeys and small spotted sheep all divided from each other in small fields with our access over well-built stiles. The weather has lifted, and the light over the estuary is stunning. Our walk ends at Upper Framilode.

Jane's Walk 2024 – Day 10

We arrive back at Upper Framilode just as the tide turns again and see clearly the Severn Bore wave coming up the estuary although not as spectacularly as at certain times of year. All signs of the sand banks have disappeared. Today's walk takes us around the Arlington peninsular, which means we walk for 8.5 miles but end only 3/4s of a mile from the start. The path is well maintained all along this route mainly on flood banks.

During the day, we witness the change in the estuary from deep fast, fast-moving water to swirling mud flats as the tide goes out again and the birds return. On the West side, we can see into the Forest of Dean, and ahead, as the river bends to the right, are the Cotswolds stretching back to our home in Oxfordshire.

The houses of Newnham, on the west bank of the river, are only a mile away, but to get to visit your neighbours means at least a 50-mile trip, as there is no bridge on this stretch of the river from Gloucester to the old Severn Bridge in Bristol!

We reach The Old Passage Inn, which is closed and looks as if it is going through a complete whether it is to remain as a pub is unclear.

In prehistoric times, Old Passage was a crossing connecting the Arlington peninsular with the iron mills in the Forest of Dean. The Romans are thought to have crossed here, too, and some accounts suggest this was on the backs of elephants. Cattle drovers would favour this spot to cross the river, and a ferry operated here from 1809 until after the Second World War.

We picnicked on the porch of the parish church in Arlington. Poor Tom has a very bad back, so Richard finished the walk with me, and Tom met us at Fretherne with the car.

Jane's Walk 2024 – Day 11

Today, we are joined by a good friend and his golden Labrador Tatty-Bogle, after the Scots name for a scarecrow.

Instead of walking down the river's edge, the path takes us down the Gloucester and Sharpness canal. The canal here is much wider than the average, built to navigate large freight around the tidal Severn with its dangerous mud flats. We pass no locks on this stretch, and all the bridges are on a swing system that is either operated manually or electronically to allow tall boats through.

The rain has started and we are a pretty bedraggled group when we stop for lunch at a pub in Slimbridge, including 2 dripping dogs. This was not helped by Tatty jumping into the canal and then having to be dragged out by her collar up the concrete sides.

We are joined for some of the afternoon by our host tonight.

I had hoped we might see some interesting waterfowl around here so close to the wildfowl sanctuary of Slimbridge, but I am told that it is too early for the migratory season when large numbers of birds come in.

The rain eases up in the afternoon and we have a pleasant walk along the canal to Purton. The river and the canal are by now only a few hundred yards away from each other. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were concerns that the river erosion would affect the sides

of the canal, and from 1909 until 1963, it was decided to stop this erosion by stranding old redundant boats along the side of the canal, known as the Purton's Ship's Graveyard. There are now around 50 of them, all silted up together, forming an effective barrier against the tidal river. All their names and tonnage are on a sign by the canal as a record of who and what they were.

A little further on, we pass under two huge stone pillars, all that is left of the 1879 railway bridge that spanned the 3/4 mile across the river, bringing coal to Sharpness. In 1960, on a foggy night, two ships, carrying 395 tons of black oil and 354 tons of petroleum, collided with the bridge, respectively, causing an enormous explosion, bringing down two spans of the bridge and killing five crew members. The bridge was never rebuilt due to cost.

We arrive in Sharpness, which is the termination of the canal where the ships can re-join the river through a series of locks. At that moment, there is a violent thunderstorm, and we get soaked to the skin walking through the docks to the car which is prevented from getting closer to us due to traffic bollards. Our poor host has to contend with our soaking clothes when we arrive back in her home in Slimbridge

Jane's Walk 2024 – Day 12

We wake up to the sound of thunder and pouring rain yet again. Having only just managed to get our clothes sufficiently dry enough to wear again today, we are reluctant to get going early. Our son-in-law, John, is joining us from Oxford, and he rings in to say he will be late, so that suits us well. Our hostess also decides to join us at the last minute, which is lovely.

The rain has finally stopped, and it is a misty, rather muggy morning with visibility not brilliant. The tide is still up when we arrive on the very well-built embankment with tidal defences. We are quite surprised how high the water comes at high tide regularly, evidenced by the flat-tened sea grass below us.

The path deviates around a number of tidal ponds and around the now-disused Berkeley power station, which cleverly has been turned into a successful technical college. Back to the water's edge the high walled embankment continues and now the massive sandbanks have re-appeared, teeming with birds. Sadly with poor visibility and not very good binoculars I am unable to identify many of them, although the distinctive flight of 2 herons are easy to see. They always remind me of prehistoric creatures.

Richard picks us up along the way to drive us back to Berkeley for lunch. This is a pretty town, dominated by Berkeley Castle, a 14th century castle and still home to the Berkeley family. Our afternoon walk is much the same along the embankment, and we pass a number of warning devices, the modern substitutes for lighthouses, as this must be a very treacherous part of the estuary. In one field, we are met by five inquisitive llamas who come over to take a look at us. At the Oldbury Power station, we can see the old Severn bridge in the distance and know we are coming to the end of our walk. Here, we turn left through farmland, recently sprayed with farm manure. Past huge battery chicken houses, which have no windows and are so well sealed, you cannot even hear the chickens inside; poor things!!

Then back to Berkeley, where we are staying for the next two nights.

Jane's Walk 2024 – Day 13

We have a good night, after a lovely supper party. We drive back to the estuary, which is still a bit hazy, but at least it's dry.

We meet a twitcher, who is very excited as he has seen two Osprey this morning. They are rare in this area, although he has seen them on other occasions.

The tide is coming in, so the sand banks are disappearing, so he tells us he is off home. The embankment continues to make walking easy. We negotiate around the comparatively new Oldbury Nuclear Power Plant which replaced the old one we passed yesterday. It is a vast place and feels slightly sinister as we walk alongside high-security fences with warning signs about being a top security facility, including the prohibition of flying drones near the site. There appears to be no one around.

Further along the path we have to take a detour inland around a sailing club full of sail-

ing boats of all sizes. Our prescribed path should take us into the village of Pullens Green

and back down the other side. However we are told by a local couple that we can cross over through the Sluice Gate making quite a considerable short cut. Richard picks us up a couple of miles further on as there is nowhere for lunch nearby.

Back after lunch, we are beginning to approach the old Severn Bridge crossing over to Wales. The map indicates we can get around the bridge by keeping to the shoreline and then going over a footbridge. However, the shoreline is clearly not navigable at high tide, and there is

a steep cliff on our left, so we retrace our steps, finding the way up an extremely steep hill. There are no signs at the bottom that this is the right route so we are very pleased to find the gate at the top.

We walk over the motorway and have to re-route ourselves through the village of Old Passage as we are reluctant to walk down the very busy A403 with a very narrow footpath to re-join our path. As it turns out, this was a very good decision as that part of the footpath had been closed.

Back on to the embankment we make good progress and leave the river to meet up with Richard at Northwick. This is where we say goodbye to the River Severn as we take a rather different end route tomorrow.

Jane's Walk 2024 – Day 14

As I mentioned at the end of yesterday's report, we decided at the start that instead of completing the Severn Way at the quayside in Bristol, we would deviate and finish our walk at our son's church in Stoke Gifford.

We intend to meet him and his family for lunch, so we make an early start as we need to complete our 8-mile walk in the morning. We leave the prescribed walk signs and head down ordinary footpaths, which can be hazardous depending on their upkeep. We are pleasantly surprised as most of our route into Bristol is on bridleways, and although very wet due to heavy rain last night, progress is easy.

We pass over the M4 and then walk alongside it for some time which is a very noisy experience.

We remark on the very deep culverts, beside the tracks, full of water and well maintained. Much of our route runs parallel with a busy railway line which then disappears into a tunnel as we face a very steep wooded hill. Tom and I are very pleased that we can still do hills as long as we take it slow and steady and keep looking down at our feet so as not to be put off. At the top of the track, a footbridge takes us now over the M5, and then we find ourselves in Bristol proper and walk through a large modern commercial estate called Astec West, full of offices of multi-national companies.

For the next 1.5 hours, we walk through suburban Bristol, arriving at the church a bit later than planned, to a very warm welcome from our family, who have made a wonderful banner of greeting for us.

We are pleased to have finished, but it has been a good trip, and we are thrilled we can still do these walks.