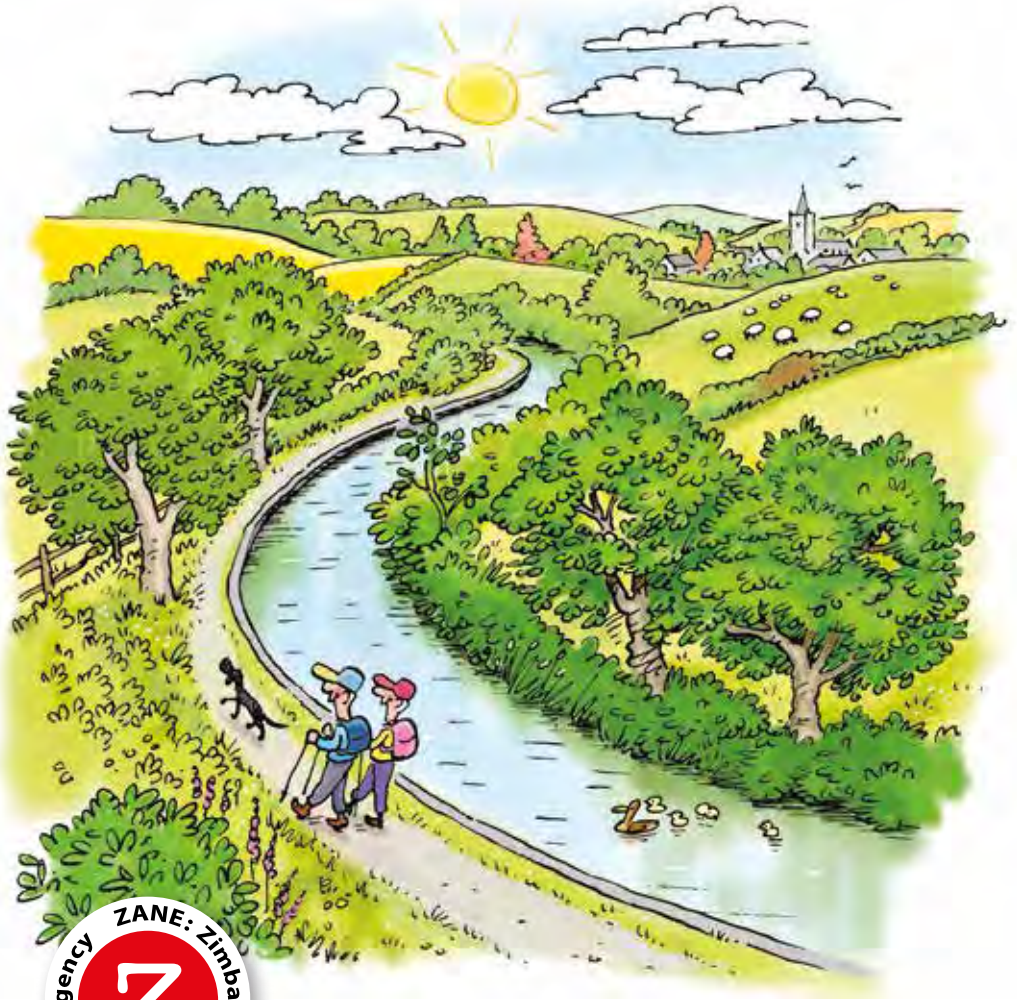


This Blessed Plot

Tom and Jane Benyon



ZANE: Zimbabwe A National Emergency

Reg Charity No 1112949

Still walking for Zimbabwe's destitute pensioners



Day	Date	Start Point	End Point
1 Mon	31- Aug	Bristol	Somerdale
2 Tue	1-Sept	Somerdale	Bath (Lower Weston)
3 Wed	2-Sept	Bath (Lower Weston)	Winsley
4 Thu	3-Sept	Winsley	Semington
5 Fri	4-Sept	Semington	Devizes
6 Sat	5-Sept	Devizes	Ladies Bridge, Wilcot
7 Sun	6-Sept	Ladies Bridge, Wilcot	Wolfhall Bridge, Burbage
Mon	7-Sept	Rest Day	
8 Tue	8-Sept	Wolfhall Bridge, Burbage	Dun Mill Lock, Hungerford
9 Wed	9-Sept	Dun Mill Lock, Hungerford	Newbury
10 Thu	10-Sept	Newbury	Woolhampton
11 Fri	11-Sept	Woolhampton	Burghfield, Reading
12 Sat	12-Sept	Burghfield, Reading	Shiplake
13 Sun	13-Sept	Shiplake	Aston
14 Mon	14-Sept	Aston	Bourne End



“ 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



A picture tells a thousand words. For an insight into ZANE’s work, please take a look at our website homepage (zane.uk.com), and click on the three-minute film.

Dear Reader

Jane and I, accompanied by our dog Moses, recently completed another ZANE walk. Here is our commentary, *This Blessed Plot*, which we hope you will enjoy.

We are so grateful for the generosity of ZANE supporters. That so many of you sponsor our walks and send messages of encouragement is a great blessing. Thank you.

Your support enables ZANE to provide life-changing and life-saving aid to many thousands of destitute people in Zimbabwe – people like Harold and his wife, Sarah, whose story you will read about in this booklet. The couple were brutally evicted from their farm, an ordeal that resulted in the death of Harold's mother. Thanks to your generosity, both now receive food aid from ZANE, while Harold, who is facing numerous health complications, is also receiving medical care that has probably saved his life.

On behalf of Harold and Sarah, as well as the 2,100 impoverished and vulnerable pensioners ZANE supports, we thank you. Your donations enable us to provide shelter, food and medicine, while offering care and encouragement to so many vulnerable and destitute people. Your donations send a loud message of compassion from the UK.

We never take your support for granted. Thank you.

Please note that the views expressed in these pages are ours alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the wider ZANE team.

Yours sincerely

Tom Benyon

Jane Benyon



Tom and Jane Benyon (and Moses)

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Don't Let the Old Man In!

30 August – The Day Before

Jane and I were thinking of calling this year's blog *Don't Let the Old Man In!*

I nicked the idea from the great Clint Eastwood, who came up with the phrase after being asked, aged 88, where he got the inspiration and energy to make yet another film. His response? "I just get up every morning and go out. And I don't let the old man in."

"What about the old woman?" cried my beloved. All I could reply was, "Sorry, Jane... but Clint simply didn't cater for you."

As the years advance, we get increasingly fragile, and it becomes ever more sensible to heed the sage advice of billionaire Mike Bloomberg, who declared that after the age of 70 there's one thing we should always hold on to tightly – bannisters.

Jane and I are probably world-class experts when it comes to confronting the hazards of long-distance walking in the UK. In light of this, we've made several demands of our mapping team: no vast hills; no miles of plough; no crawling along untended, overgrown tracks that have been ignored by councils for a generation; and then, totally essential, no winding, minor roads, which are Russian roulette – all it takes is one texting loony and it's "Good night, sweet prince" for both of us (and dog Moses). Oh, and please ensure we don't get lost.

The team rarely listen to a word we say, but fingers crossed.

Why We Walk

We've been exercising at the gym three times a week. I know gyms are a genteel horror story to many readers but each to their own medicine. Of course, age and decrepitude get us all in the end, but I am led to believe that rigorous exercise pushes away the decay for as long as possible.

The walks are part of our lives, and once again we are preparing to totter off across "This Blessed Plot" of England – bringing relief to those in Zimbabwe who face old age, despair and ruined lives through no fault of their own.

It's more than 20 years since I founded "Zimbabwe A National Emergency" – ZANE. The poverty

experienced there, in a country without an NHS or functioning social services, is simply terrible. Poverty anywhere in the UK or the so-called “first world” is one thing; poverty in Zimbabwe is on another planet entirely.

As ever, I thank our driver and friend Richard Moyle for his good nature, great tolerance and for looking after us with such kindness. Our cartoonist Lee Fearnley is a joy to work with.

And, of course, heartfelt thanks to our loyal supporters who sponsor us, walk with us, right royally feed us, give us beds and accommodation, and encourage us as we plod along. We rarely mention our hosts’ names. Suffice it to say how much we appreciate the warm welcomes and hospitality.

Please enjoy the walk commentary, remembering that I write for fun on my five favourite subjects: sex, money, religion, death and politics. If you don’t agree with me, then that’s fine, but kindness, tolerance and humour are all. I am persuaded by anxious types to avoid “woo-woo” subjects that can divide families and communities as happened in the bitter Civil War between Cromwell’s Parliamentarians and Charles I’s Royalists (the joys of Brexit anyone?)

My views on Gaza, “transgenderism” and “Black Lives Matter” are to me no more than common sense but are regarded by my scaredy-cat colleagues and close friends as topics – to mix the animal metaphors – that might frighten the horses. However, if you would like to read them, send an email!

Please note that the views expressed are my musings and don’t represent the views of the team or trustees of ZANE.

I read voraciously and magpie ideas for the commentary from any medium with an original pulse. My particular thanks to Miles Morland, *The Spectator*, Tim

Binder, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and Michael Bates.

Shock and Release

As we were packing, we received the sad news that our close friend’s wife had died. We all knew her death was imminent because her personality had long since been shredded by the relentless claws of dementia. But the fact that her death was a release doesn’t stop it being a shock. When the scenery on the stage is suddenly wrenched away, we are often left bumping into the furniture.

**We rarely mention
our hosts’ names.
Suffice it to say how
much we appreciate
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Vive la Révolution!

31 August – Day 1: Bristol to Somerdale

We had a great start to the walk, with broken cloud and weather that was just warm enough. We didn't expect trustees Charles and Angela, or our grandson Isaac and his girlfriend, Izzy, to join us. It was a great joy to have them, and the miles melted.

Sadly, there was an occasional stench. When will the water companies stop shunting raw sewage into our rivers?

Family Planning

At the engagement party of our eldest grandson – to a delightful Texan – last week, I suggested to one of our granddaughters, 13-year-old Annabel Benyon, that Jane and I were keen to see any number of great-grandchildren.

She looked thoughtful.

"I may get married sometime in the next 10 years," she replied, "and I'm sure you will still be around to see it."

A pause. Then she added:

"Maybe..."

A Little History

A bit of history you may not know...

I met an American at dinner recently who told me how fortunate the US had been to have won the War of Independence in 1783 – and how awful it would have been if they had lost.

Being the friendly chap I am, I agreed. Just imagine how dreadful

it would have been if the Americans had remained part of the British family of nations. They could have ended up like those benighted countries, Canada, Australia and New Zealand – which somehow managed to achieve independence gradually and without firing a shot. Look at the state they're in today compared to the US – just saying!

But of course, the Iron Law of Unintended Consequences bit back big time. The Americans would never have won that war without the help of France's King Louis XVI. Desperate to give the ghastly British a bloody nose, he bankrolled the American cause.

And now comes the best bit. The French monarchy was bankrupted by the vast cost. The taxes levied to pay this monstrous bill helped trigger the French Revolution 13 years later – in which Louis, the treacherous old sod, had his head chopped off.

Laughing? Moi?



Drink to That!

As the war had been won for them by the French, you might expect the signatories to the Declaration of Independence to have toasted them with champagne, but that didn't happen. British duties on imported goods had made French wine unaffordable (which led to the "no taxation without representation" nonsense). However, because of an oversight, wine from the island of Madeira could be imported tax-free – and so it was, in vast quantity.

Two days before the signing of the United States Constitution, the attendees of the Constitutional

Convention – led by one George Washington – gathered at Philadelphia's City Tavern for a party. The bar bill for the evening still exists. It shows that 55 men ordered 54 bottles of Madeira along with a shedload of whisky, cider, beer, punch and some overpriced claret.

Two days later, befuddled by hangovers, 39 of them blearily signed the US Constitution. Washington was a particular fan of Madeira, reportedly drinking a bottle each day "to help with the toothache".

Even though the Yankees no longer had to pay tax on imported French

wine, Madeira remained America's wine of choice. In 1803, when France's bankruptcy obliged it to sell its vast chunk of America to the very people whose fight for freedom it had so recently financed, a toast was drunk to celebrate the signing of the Louisiana Purchase. Representatives from France, Spain and the United States were all

present. For the toasts, the French drank champagne, the Spanish drank Málaga wine and the Americans drank "America's wine" – Madeira. Its popularity showed no sign of waning – indeed, when Francis Scott Key wrote America's anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner"; in 1814, he was reportedly legless on Madeira.



No Booze Please...

Who do you prefer – the drinkers or the teetotallers?

Teetotallers

Hitler
Trump
Joe Biden
George W. Bush (after AA)
Lenin
Modi
Mussolini

Drinkers

Churchill
Herbert Asquith
Richard Nixon
George W. Bush (before AA)
Boris Yeltsin
Lyndon Johnson
George Pompidou
François Mitterrand
Jean-Claude Juncker
Henry VIII

Bath Teashop

1 September – Day 2: Somerdale to Bath (Lower Weston)

It was a perfect day for walking – though the bulging bags of garbage scattered around some of the most beautiful spots rather spoilt the view. Why do vandals dump their rubbish like this? Why can't they be bothered to take it to the tip?

We were once again loyally supported by Charlie and Angela. What troopers they've turned out to be!

Love on the 10:30

John Betjeman's delightful poem "In a Bath Teashop" came to mind as the 10.30am train from Oxford to London sped through the countryside:

*"Let us not speak, for the love we
bear one another –
Let us hold hands and look.
She, such a very ordinary little
woman;
He such a thumping crook;
But both, for a moment, little lower
than the angels
In the teashop inglenook."*

A couple sat opposite one another. He was overweight, with a blob of a face, bald, spotty and covered in tattoos. If you were an artist, you would have wiped off the paint and started again. She had a Christmas-pudding figure with the merest hint of a waist. Thick glasses, mauve-striped hair and crooked teeth completed the picture. My first

instinct was sadness that nature had been so unkind.

But one thing changed all that – one powerful, transformative thing. They were in love. Not just "fond of" each other or "the best of friends", but deeply in love. They sent one another signals and shared secret smiles as they held hands, oblivious to everyone else in the carriage.

For an hour they traded with one another – with their eyes more than words. It was a tenderness that excluded the rest of us and created its own special sphere. They were completely besotted with each other. It made them beautiful – and then I understood Betjeman's poem. Shortchanged on physical attractiveness but "a little lower than the angels". They were unaware that, when I raised my Styrofoam cup of coffee to my lips, I was in fact toasting them.

In a world where our concept of beauty is continually shaped by



photographers, fashion editors and filmmakers, it's easy to forget that the ingredients that create and nourish exciting, satisfying and enduring relationships defy the camera.

As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote, "What is essential is invisible to the eye."

Lost in Translation

Why can't we, with our vast vocabulary, have a word like *forelsket*?

This Norwegian word describes the euphoric feeling of falling in love – when you can't quite believe that someone so perfect has walked into your life.

And what about the Portuguese word *saudade*? It captures the bittersweet, melancholic yearning for something beautiful that has been lost – perhaps a love affair, a childhood home or a once-flourishing business. There is pain in the loss, yet also a quiet pleasure that such loveliness once graced our lives.

Then there is the Russian *toska*, a word describing a refined, elevated and appalling kind of boredom. Not the tedium that comes from a lack of pleasing stimulation but the kind that persists even in the presence of things that ought to delight us – creativity, wit, intelligence, history, even the universe.

The Turkish word *hüzün* expresses the gloomy sense that things are in decline and likely only to get worse. (Are UK newspapers suffering from *hüzün*? Just asking.)

Another example is the Indonesian word *jayus* – a lame joke that nonetheless elicits good-natured amusement rather than irritation through its sheer innocent silliness.

Lastly, the Spanish word *querencia* conveys the idea of a place where we feel safe – a "home" that doesn't have to be where we live, but from which we draw our strength and inspiration.

Eat, Drink and Be Wary

2 September – Day 3: Bath (Lower Weston) to Winsley

Today we had ideal British weather – a sprinkling of rain early this morning followed by cloudy skies. We had lunch with an old colleague from Parliament whom I hadn't seen for ages.

Eating Out

Our lunch got me thinking about the serious business of dining out, so here are a few thoughts on the matter, courtesy of Jay Rayner:

There is nothing you can eat that will detoxify you. That's what your kidneys and liver are for. Don't bother with "wellness" because no one is interested in "illness".

Fat is where the flavour is, and salt is the difference between eating in black and white and eating in technicolour – even if your cardiologist would disagree.

Most dishes can be improved with the addition of bacon.

Kitchen knives in holiday rentals are always terrible – take your own.

Avoid cookbooks that tell readers cooking good food is simple and quick. It takes time and experience.

Hyper-expensive food is all about status and never about deliciousness. Don't bother with it.

Tipping should be abolished. It's

wrong that restaurant staff should be dependent on the mood of customers for the size of their wages. They should be paid properly. This works in Japan, France and Australia, and it should work here too.

All new restaurants should employ someone over 40 to check that the print on the menu is large enough for oldies to read, the lighting bright enough to read by and the seats comfortable enough for a lengthy meal. If the waiter has to explain the concept behind the menu, there is something wrong with it.

Waiters should always write down orders.

Eating alone in a restaurant with someone you love (yourself) is always a pleasure and an opportunity to watch people.

Expensive restaurants are always wasted on the people who can afford them.

Food should always be served on plates, not on garden trowels, planks or slates. On plates.

Trust Your Gut

Follow these golden rules for choosing a restaurant:

Buffets are where good taste goes to die.

Picnics are a nightmare.

Never go into a restaurant that has shiny photographic menus displayed in four languages, particularly if one is Russian.

Never enter a restaurant if there's a waiter outside trying to entice you in.

Never go into a restaurant if more than half the customers are waiting for food and only a few are eating. Go somewhere else – the service has to be terrible!

Bon appétit!

Ministry of Love

Mark Twain said, "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why."

I know why my friend Henry Brooks was born.

Henry has Down's syndrome. On the face of it, he's a victim of one of life's cruellest hazards. But when he enters a room and sees someone, he breaks into a broad smile, yells "Hello" and rushes over to hug them.

English people take a little time getting used to Henry's "style", but it's impossible not to be charmed by his innocence, warmth and over-the-top exuberance.

Henry was born to spread love. I can't think of a rarer or more valuable quality.



What We Leave Behind

3 September – Day 4: Winsley to Semington

As supporters will know, I'm not one to shy away from the more challenging subjects – meaning I can hold my own in any conversation...

That is, until I'm rendered speechless.

At a supper party during the last walk, a delightful host suddenly fixed me with a glittering eye and asked, "What's the point of marriage after the lust has gone?"

He stared at me while my mouth opened and shut like a carp.

"Well?" he insisted.

The other guests stared fixedly at their plates. Jane was mute.

"Can we return to this during pudding?" I stammered.

Somehow, we never got round to finishing the discussion.

Love and Loss

"I can't hate you, no matter how much people tell me that I should.

I miss you more than I thought I could,

I still love you in some way.

I might be able to forgive you one day,

But until then I will cling to your memory.

*I'm trying to forgive your treachery,
Our friendship will haunt me forever
For trying to hate you is a fruitless
endeavour."*

For those who are abandoned in love, feelings are likely to be a cocktail of grief, anger, despair and wounded self-esteem.

Initial reactions to the news you've been dumped can be disastrous. Some launch an immediate barrage of hatred and blame, effectively killing off any hope of reconciliation. Others grovel in the hope of winning back their lost love – and in so doing, compromise an important part of their personality and self-esteem. Some remain diminished and steeped in bitterness, while others accept their loss and, like the poet quoted above, try to find ways of coping that enable them to move on with their lives.

It's a sad reality that when relationships are sundered, the good times are often forgotten, the qualities the couple once valued in

IT'S NOT FAIR !!
IT'S NOT FAIR !!
IT'S NOT FAIR !!



YEAH... IT'S HARD
TO SEE WHY SHE
PACKED HIM IN !

each other are rubbished, and the time they spent together is regarded as wasted.

If only the psychological contract that underpins every close relationship included the following words, from a poem by Michael K. Deaver:

*"If you should go one day where I
cannot be,
I'll cherish that of you that you leave
in me.*

*And I hope you will be forever true to
that of me that I have left in you."*

Like a Drunken Sailor

When I was chairman of the Milton Keynes and Buckingham health authorities, I was astounded by the waste. Staff had absolutely no idea how to make savings – it simply wasn't part of the culture.

The NHS is an incredibly generous system that the public takes for granted. It oozes waste, and no politician wants to take on the career-shattering responsibility of trying to reform it. Why? Former chancellor

Nigel Lawson once claimed that the NHS was the nearest thing the English have to a god, and so anyone seeking to make changes was immediately accused of blasphemy.

Of course, opportunities to make savings abound. Take the 148 million hospital outpatient appointments made across the NHS last year. Each one costs between £120 and £165 on average.

Guess what? More than five per cent of patients don't show. So, as the Americans say, do the math. That equates to around £1.2 billion of your money wasted each year.

Next, around a million doctor appointments are made every day, but thousands simply don't show – marked as “DNA” (did not attend). There's no penalty, so why should non-attendees bother? Common courtesy is no more than a dream. I'm told that trying to impose a penalty – say a tenner – is too complex. How daft is that? We're issued with an NHS number. A simple addition to the NHS app, allowing patients to pay a refundable deposit, could easily be administered by the software. New Zealand operates such a system, so why not here?



Free at the point of use also means free to abuse, so why was it set up in this cavalier way? That's easy. The NHS was established at a time when the public had a far lower sense of entitlement, and we were more thoughtful in those faraway days. Few care today.

Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman wrote that there are four ways in which you can spend money. First, on yourself. When you do that, you really watch what you're spending, and you really try to grind out the greatest value from your hard-earned cash. Then you can spend it on someone else, for example by buying a birthday present for a friend. Well, then you're not so careful about the content of the

present, but you're very careful about the cost.

Then, you can spend someone else's money on yourself. And if that's the case, why not treat yourself to a jolly good lunch with oysters, fillet steak and a bottle of Chablis? Finally, you can spend somebody else's money on somebody else. Then you're not too concerned how much it is, or about the value you get for the money.

Welcome to the NHS. The public has little understanding of the vast scale of the money poured into the system or how it's spent. This disconnect is one of its fundamental problems – and it will end up bankrupting us all.

In Memory of Dinah

4 September – Day 5: Semington to Devizes

How many miles of stone walls were built by our ancestors? Imagine all those bad backs! And walking by the canal, how many navvies spent their entire lives digging out the vast quantities of earth that had to be excavated to make the canal operational? What were they paid? How did they live? What did they do in their free time?

What an astonishing achievement. I'll bet it was completed more quickly than HS2.

A Grief Like No Other

I don't know whether there's a mental condition called "Never-ending Grief Syndrome" (NEGS) after the death of a beloved pet – but if there were, its symptoms would include deep emotional pain, intense longing and a lingering regret that goes on for months. I read somewhere that 20 per cent of people have admitted that the death of their dog (or cat) was the worst loss they'd ever experienced. I can well understand this.

I can't forget the look in Dinah's amber eyes when the vet gave her the injection. Her head was in my lap, and I knew she trusted me completely to keep her safe and look after her. And I bloody well killed her. Of course, I had no choice: her spine had been broken by a car. But it was my fault because I'd left the gate open. I'm sure she knew what was about to happen – and I wept as

the injection took hold and an eternal stillness settled gently across her trusting face.

It may be tasteless to admit this, but the circumstances of her death are tattooed on my mind far more vividly than the deaths of many of my friends, even close relatives.

I hope I am a proportionate person when it comes to animals. I have experienced the deaths of many dogs and cats, as well as several horses, but the death of Dinah was more traumatic than any of them. She was beautiful and courageous, with an irrepressible zest for life. By the sea, she'd launch herself into a ceaseless campaign, like King Canute, to persuade the waves to recede.

She loved both Jane and me unconditionally. Whenever we returned from some trip or other, she'd greet us with slobbering affection, leaping up and down as if she were on a pogo stick. Everyone

in the house knew when we were about to return because, long before our car could be heard, Dinah would start to howl and hurl herself joyfully at the garden gate.

After her death, we vowed never to have another Staffie because we simply couldn't bear to go through that degree of trauma and heartbreak again. I suppose we gradually recovered though, and the raw pain of our loss abated. As ZANE supporters will know, today we share our lives with our precious cockapoo, Moses, who scampers around Britain with us.

I am a stoic person, but even now, writing about Dinah's death makes me well up in a way that hardly ever happens. When I think of relatives who have died, I don't mourn them in the same way. Their deaths, after long and fruitful lives, seemed more like a release.

Dinah's death left a definite emotional trace.

True Friendship

A couple of years ago, I included an item called "The Five Regrets of the Dying." One regret was that, when we become lazy or allow life to get in the way, it's all too easy to lose touch with the tiny number of friends we truly love. As death approaches, many people feel an overwhelming need to restore those relationships before it's too late.

The importance of real friendship was underscored after some of my

former colleagues lost their seats in Parliament during the 2024 election. Many remain unemployed to this day and fear they may never find worthwhile work again. One even contacted me in the vain hope I could offer him a job.

Once the reality of his defeat had sunk in, my friend found it difficult to reinvent himself in a new career. Having drawn up a list of 30 or 40 people, he set about contacting them to see if they could help. Among them were people who had regularly invited him and his wife to dinner and parties – people he regarded as close friends. He was shocked to receive only a handful of replies, the majority making their excuses. The horrible truth was that outside Parliament, he'd become an embarrassment. He learned in the hardest possible way the difference between political affiliation and true friendship, between the "mere crowd" and the few people who valued him for himself.

There are those who never experience the kind of crisis that reveals the difference between real friends and the crowd. Imagine how hard it must be for celebrities and members of the Royal Family to know who their friends are. Especially for Lady Susan Hussey, a royal lady in waiting who was cruelly set up by charity founder Ngozi Fulani. Dressed in her national costume, Fulani was asked, in all innocence, "Where are you from?" She complained that the question



contained "racial innuendo." After 22 years' loyal and unpaid service Hussey was fired, just like that! I suspect she found out the hard way who her friends were (and weren't).

When we are young, we are unreasonably vulnerable to the influences of the crowd. What we wear, our taste in music and cars, our role models, and our choice of food, drink and restaurants are all shaped by what "they" will think and how our choices will be judged by "them". It can be a painful lesson to discover that the crowd can be cruel and hopelessly wrong.

By the time we reach a certain age, we should have accumulated enough experience to distinguish the people who matter little in our lives from those who are true friends. We should be able to discern the difference between the mere crowd – from whom there's nothing to be expected beyond fleeting emotions that leave no trace – and the very few who appreciate us for who we are, and for whom we feel the same affection and loyalty.

Once we pass a certain age, there's no excuse for any confusion between the two.

The Perils of Prediction

5 September – Day 6: Devizes to Ladies Bridge, Wilcot

I much enjoy a vigorous discussion, but not when the other person knows nothing about the subject. In fact, when I discover that my opponent is hopelessly ill-informed, I make my apologies and talk about the weather.

I recall that, in 2017, a friend of mine voted Labour – a vote for Jeremy Corbyn.

I asked him why.

He replied, “My son tells me such distressing news about council housing in Lambeth that I felt I had no choice.”

I pointed out that Lambeth Council was Labour-controlled.

“Oh dear!”

Churchill wrote that he still just about believed in democracy after speaking to any constituent for a mere five minutes.

The Folly of Experts

Michael Gove once said, “I’ve had enough of experts.”

It’s fascinating how often confident predictions turn out to be incorrect. The more seriously an expert takes themselves, the more likely they are to be hilariously wrong. Economists often make astrology look respectable, but what about other forecasters?

Consider these examples:

Back in 1943, Tom Watson, Chairman of IBM – which, 20 years later, would command 80 per cent of the world’s computer market – wrote, “There’s a world market for maybe five computers.” IBM later launched a personal computer but did nothing with it, leaving the market to college drop-out Steve Jobs – who showed that the personal PC might actually have its uses.

In 1946, the great Darryl F. Zanuck, head of 20th Century Fox, claimed, “Television won’t be able to hold on to any market it captures after the first six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night.”

In 1953, Alex Lewyt, president of Lewyt Vacuum Cleaners, declared, “Nuclear powered vacuum cleaners will be a reality within 10 years.”

Ken Olsen, founder and president of Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC), a dominant force in computing in the 1970s, said, “There’s no reason why anyone would want a computer in their home.”



In 1995, Robert Metcalfe, founder of 3Com, declared, "I predict the internet will soon go spectacularly supernova and in 1996 catastrophically collapse."

In 1997, Nathan Myhrvold, chief technology officer at Microsoft, announced, "Apple is already dead."

Freeze or Fry?

Climate forecasting, however, is in a class of its own. Few subjects are as polarising – in some circles, if you're perceived as a denier it can be career-cancelling and friendship-busting.

I go back a long way with this subject, which was already a red-hot topic in the 1970s. The only difference was that, back then, it was all about global cooling. A new Ice

Age was on its way and the statistics proved it beyond doubt. Indeed, Corporal Frazer in *Dad's Army* was right all along – "We're all doomed!"

Without apology, newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* dramatically changed their views just after the millennium.

So, let's take a look at 40 years of eco-apocalyptic predictions that never came to pass:

1. In 1970, the *Boston Globe* ran the headline, "Scientist Predicts a New Ice Age by 21st Century" (reporting the warning of PC Lodge, a scientist at the National Center for Atmospheric Research).
2. In 1971, the *Washington Post* reported, "Disastrous New Ice Age

Coming" – quoting NASA scientist SI Rasool.

3. In 1973, a Brown University letter to President Nixon warned of global cooling.
4. In 1974, *The Guardian* ran the headline, "Space satellites show New Ice Age Coming Fast."
5. In 1974, *Time* magazine published "Another Ice Age?," noting that since the 1940s, the temperature had dropped by 2.7°F.
6. In 1976, climatologist Stephen Schneider of the University of Wisconsin lamented "the deaf ear" his warnings of an Ice Age had received.

7. In 2004, *The Guardian* reported how the Pentagon had warned President Bush that "Climate change will destroy us" – and that Britain could face a Siberian climate in less than 20 years.

The Great Switcheroo

In a remarkable change of direction, we went from "global cooling will kill us all" to "global warming will fry us all." Consider the following:

1. In 2008, the *Associated Press* reported a NASA scientist's claim that within five to ten years, the Arctic could be free of summer sea ice.



2. In 2008, Al Gore warned that the Arctic could be ice-free in summer by 2013.
 3. In 2009, Prince Charles warned in *The Independent*, "Just 96 months to save the world... The price of capitalism is just too high."
 4. In 2009, Gordon Brown – referring to the need for a global agreement at the Copenhagen climate summit – wrote in *The Independent*, "We have fewer than 50 days to save our planet from catastrophe."
 5. In 2013, *The Guardian* ran the headline, "Ice-free Arctic in two years heralds methane catastrophe – scientist." The article reported a warning that an ice-free summer Arctic could trigger the release of a 50-gigatonne pulse of methane capable of destabilising the climate system.
 6. In 2013, *The Guardian* reported, "US Navy Predicts Ice-free Arctic by 2016." We are reassured that "the US Navy's department of oceanography uses complex modelling to make its forecasts more accurate than others." (Ho Ho.)
 7. In 2014, French foreign minister Laurent Fabius – referring to the time remaining before the 2015 Paris climate conference – claimed, "We have 500 days to avoid climate chaos."
- So, who will throw something at Greta Thunberg if she changes her mind and starts campaigning to warn us of an imminent Ice Age?
- I wonder when the Italian saying, *lo non c'ero, e se c'ero dormivo* ("I wasn't there and if I was, I was asleep") might come in handy?
-

A Shameful Silence

6 September –

Day 7: Ladies Bridge, Wilcot to Wolfhall Bridge, Burbage

There are certain subjects that I have chosen not to write about because they cause so much pain and emotion. It was Jonathan Swift who wrote, "Reasoning will never make a man correct an ill opinion, which by reasoning he never acquired."

For that reason, Brexit, Gaza, assisted dying, fox hunting and Nigel Farage are off limits! But racial prejudice is another matter...

A Light Sleeper

When I was at school in the late 1950s, a Jewish friend – I remember his name to this day – suffered appalling antisemitic abuse. Of course, I rushed to his defence, single-handedly fighting the abusers.

In fact, spotty little rat that I was, I did no such thing. I pretended I

agreed with the abusers and left him friendless and slowly twisting in the wind.

Later, aged 18, I shared a room with a Rhodesian cadet at RMA Sandhurst who was violently racist. I recall his name and the vile things he said about Black people but, once again, I'm ashamed to say I said nothing.



I was also exposed to “soft” prejudice. An aunt who dealt with theatre companies used to say, “Now, so-and-so (I remember his name as well, funny that after all these years) is a ‘nice’ Jew” – the implication being that all the others weren’t nice!

It’s less obvious now, but antisemitism is back again. All those marches against Israel. Few against Iran, Burma or the suppression of freedom in Hong Kong. Funny that. Emotion only seems to erupt into hostile marches when Jews are involved. Antisemitic prejudice is a very light sleeper.

Racial prejudice and antisemitism dehumanise people. They are a refuge for the ignorant, seeking to degrade and destroy. They are the enemies of freedom and deserve to be met head-on and stamped out.

Meek and Mild

How many of you think church is boring? Is Jesus meek and mild?

In John 2:15–16, Jesus makes a whip out of cords and drives the sheep and oxen from the temple. Then he exclaims to the dove sellers, “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my father’s house into a market?”

Sometimes God wants us to get angry. Often the status quo needs challenging. Jesus lost his temper over the misuse of his Father’s house. What does this teach us today?

The people who criticised Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being boring. On the contrary, they thought he was too dynamic and challenging to be safe. It’s been left to many churches to muffle that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah and certified him as “meek and mild”, recommending him as a suitable household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.



The Assembly Line

7 September – Rest Day

In the 1950s, Second World War Spitfire hero Sir Douglas Bader gave an assembly talk to the girls of Benenden School about his part in the Battle of Britain. Not noted for his modesty, he hobbled to the blackboard on his artificial legs and chalked a series of small circles.

"It was a hell of a dogfight!" he exclaimed, pointing vaguely at the circles. "There were fockers to the left of me, fockers to the right and then I saw another focker coming straight at me."

The scandalised headmistress interrupted him by saying, "Girls, I think I should clarify that a 'Fokker' is a type of fighter plane used by the Germans."

"Yes, that's true," snapped Group

Captain Bader. "But these fockers were Messerschmitts!"

Speeches by the great and the good to school assemblies aren't usually so snappy and entertaining; instead, they are safe, boring, coddling, predictable, tedious and grandmotherly: "Work hard. Respect the teachers at this wonderful and noble school, and honour and love your parents."

What a load of patronising bollocks!



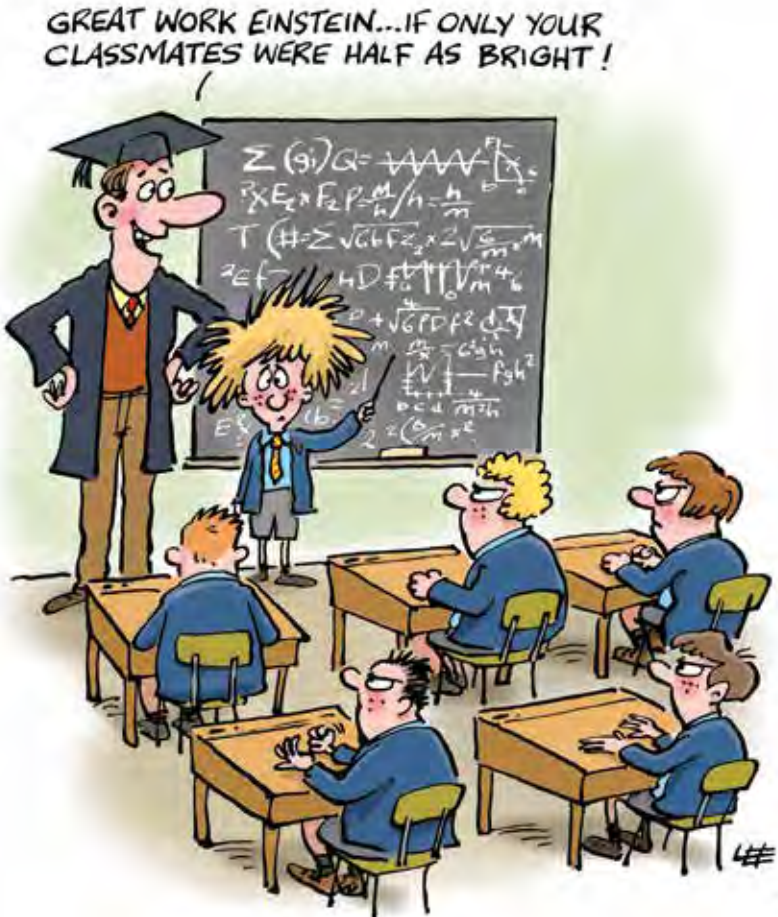
A Few Home Truths

Here's an excellent speech from a schoolmaster friend, Rodney Evans:

"The purpose of your education is to enjoy a social life... of sorts – albeit you are often surrounded by spoiled and spotty children with far too much money. Having said that, in the pecking order that pollutes the British public square, this school is said to be "smart." Notwithstanding that there are a great number of rich thickos as pupils – I suppose

their rich daddies had to send them somewhere – you have a chance to make contacts that might, just might, be useful in your future life. Second, your time here enables you to spend time in a nice, warm building; this last is the only reason your teachers bother to show up.

My advice is to be an inquisitive amateur, only study what interests you and just ignore everything else. If you come first in your exams, that will please your parents and teachers



but will generate considerable dislike amongst your contemporaries. That's a handy lesson – success brings risks.

Most of your classwork is useless. Maths, for example, is an exaggeration. There is only one number one. The rest is duplication and overstatement.

Ignore literature unless you enjoy it. It's just escapism for intellectuals – Homer, Dante, Chekhov and so on are all in the same business as Netflix: distraction. Live your life. Don't boggle at replicas offering fictional problems.

If you get a degree, as soon as you enter the real world, you'll learn the harsh reality that paper qualifications are worthless and the ability to laugh at your bosses' jokes that aren't funny is worth 20 years of schooling.

When choosing a career, reject the occupations that are essential to human life: farming, mining, building and sanitation. These careers are poorly paid, dangerous, cold and often wet... and socially negative. No one invites a scaffolder to a film premiere. The autobiographies of sewage engineers have never been the subject of bidding wars by publishing firms. A turnip grower is unlikely to be granted a knighthood. No trawlerman has ever been invited to appear on *Newsnight*.

Instead, take up an idle, glitzy and parasitical career like banking, journalism, politics or acting. If you have just a little talent, you can earn loads of money and you'll be treated as a semi-divinity.

Medicine is a useful career if you have enough patience to soothe the egos of work-shy attention-seekers who often aren't as ill as they pretend to be.

I fear your emotional life will be painful and expensive. That's just how it is. Keep your anguish to yourself and smile widely when the cameras are clicking. Your problems will start in your twenties and thirties when you fall in love. Don't be alarmed. You can extricate yourself from disaster by getting married.

If you have children and they reach adulthood without disowning you in public, then you will have achieved as much as any parent can hope for.

Trust no one. Your gut instincts are usually correct. Stay on the attack.

And finally, don't fear death. Your absence from this world will have as much effect as your presence in it – that is, very little. The reality is that you and your "legacy" will soon be forgotten.

Good luck!

Live Until You're Dead

8 September –

Day 8: Wolfhall Bridge, Burbage to Dun Mill Lock, Hungerford

We had a great evening last night – then this morning brought the sad news from a friend that his wife was gravely ill. What a sod life can be.

Life's Golden Rules

Here are some odd views from Ian Fleming (the creator of James Bond) to cheer us up. Among his scribbles were the rules he expected Bond to live by:

1. Don't waste time on women who wear a bracelet on the left ankle.
2. Beware of motor cars with two women in the front seats.
3. Never play cards against a married couple unless they're drunk.
4. Before you drink, look at the brand name on the bottle.
5. Avoid people who call you "old boy".
6. Never eat scrambled eggs unless you've made them yourself.
7. Talk secrets only in the open air.
8. Don't buy anything that eats (he forgot to finish this rule so you will never know which animal to avoid).
9. Tread carefully in the company of moustaches, sideburns and beards.
10. Live until you're dead.

DO YOU THINK BOND IS
AVOIDING US, OLD BOY?



How we've lived so long without this advice is a mystery to me.

Undressed

I have just seen *La Traviata*, one of Verdi's greatest operas, at the Royal Opera House.

It's a magnificent theatre, and the whole production was stunning,



with an orchestra at the top of its game, wonderful singing and acting, magnificent sets and superb costumes.

Then in shuffled the audience, T-shirts, tracksuits and trainers – casually dressed and totally unaware of the occasion they were attending.

Gone are the tails and white ties, magnificent dresses and jewels – all worn to honour the composer, the singers, the designers and the building.

Sad, somehow.

The Great Purge

Scrabble is perhaps your favourite board game.

For years there have been official Scrabble dictionaries detailing which words are allowed and banned. For instance, "shvitz", meaning

sweat, is now allowed (hooray!), as are "kawaii" (the quality of being lovable), "ougiya" (Mauritanian monetary unit), "dhikr" (Sufi ceremony) and, of course, the priceless "fy" (to digest). The thing the Scrabble authorities have never done is nanny us by proscribing naughty words. But now Hasbro (owner of the Scrabble brand) has banned a whole crowd of words that have been Scrabble-legal for a long time.

These are: batshit, boff, bollocks, bullshit, butcher, crumbly, effing, girlie, greybeard, hebe, honky, Jesuit, johnson (sad for Boris), libber, Mongolian, nancy, papist, poof, poontang, shagger, stiffy and willie.

But Hasbro has also unbanned some words: butch, pom, poo, sambo, jailbait and balder.

Now you know.

The Black Dog

9 September – Day 9: Dun Mill Lock, Hungerford to Newbury

Our ZANE walks are a great way to lift spirits. Here's a quote from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* that endorses that view:

"For my part, I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel's sake. The great affair is to move; to feel the needs and hitches of our life more nearly; to come down off this feather-bed of civilization, and find the globe granite underfoot and strewn with cutting flints."

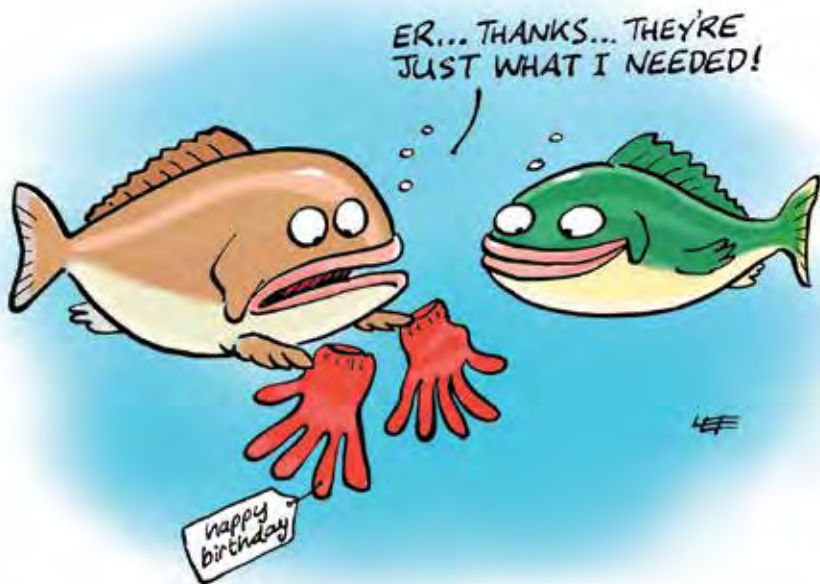
Alas, as we get up in life, and are more preoccupied with our affairs, even a holiday is a thing that must be worked for. To hold a pack upon a pack-saddle against a gale out of the freezing north is no high industry, but it is one that serves to occupy and compose the mind. And when the present is so exacting, who can annoy himself about the future?"

The First Step

Depression is on the rise. If you are one of those affected by what Churchill called the "Black Dog" and you get crushed by useless emotions such as remorse and

guilt – physically, psychologically and spiritually damaging – we must do something about it. These emotions can pervade our memories and contaminate our lighter moments. I know, for I've been there. It takes





willpower to catch these negative and self-defeating thoughts and replace them with new and more constructive ones. It can be done. I believe that we don't have to go all the way to the "freezing north" with a donkey – a long walk in the countryside with a sandwich and a bottle of water can do the trick. You'll be concentrating so hard on where you're going that the past will fade and the future will start to look after itself. After just a short while, the negative stuff starts to dissolve, and life begins to look better.

So, if you're looking up at the sky from the bottom of a well, it's good to remember that climbing out starts with the first step. Start replacing the thoughts that are keeping you where

you don't want to be in life with ones that will help you get where you want to go.

A Taste of the Past

England in the 1950s was a simpler time – here's what passed for culinary life before the world discovered avocados, hummus and bottled water.

- Fish didn't have fingers.
- Spaghetti came out of a Heinz tin.
- Curry was a surname.
- Pizza was a place with a leaning tower.
- The only choice with crisps was whether to add salt or not.

- Coffee came from a pot.
 - Espresso was an Italian train.
 - Rice was only ever served as a milk pudding.
 - Brown bread was only for those who couldn't afford white.
 - Oil was for lubricating cars; fat was for cooking.
 - Olive oil was a laxative, bought at the chemist.
 - Tea was brewed in a teapot using tea leaves.
 - Milk came in a bottle on your doorstep.
 - Eating raw fish was disgusting.
 - Yoghurt? Huh?
 - An exotic fruit was a banana.
 - Cooking outdoors was called "camping".
 - Thai restaurants were in Thailand – or Siam, as we used to call it.
 - Kebab wasn't even a word, let alone a type of food.
 - Prunes were prescribed by the doctor in case the olive oil failed to work.
 - Water came from a tap. Bottling it and charging more for it than petrol would have been regarded as insane.
 - Hardly anyone had a fridge. You kept your perishables in a meat safe outside the kitchen door.
 - The only kitchen appliance was a knife.
 - Sausages were called "bangers" because they contained so much water, they exploded when hot.
 - Chop suey was the only known Chinese dish.
 - A dishwasher was our mothers.
 - Best supper: toast with dripping.
 - Best pudding: Yorkshire pudding topped with golden syrup.
 - A hamburger was a visitor from Germany.
-

Joy Shared

10 September – Day 10: Newbury to Woolhampton

Jane and I are only too aware of how lucky we are to have good friends – but that's not the case for everyone.

Macmillan Cancer Support recently published findings showing that people between the ages of 18 and 35 had, on average, 237 Facebook friends. When asked how many could be relied on in a crisis, the average answer was two, a quarter said one and an eighth said none. Many of my older friends tell me that their friends are only to be found at work or in the golf club.

I was told about an American family that came to live in London, with the father taking charge of a company in one of the world's largest industries – for him, the opportunity of a lifetime. However, a month later, the company went bankrupt. Three years later, he stood up in his church and told the congregation that without the help and support of church members, he had no idea how he and his family could have survived.

Would such help have been forthcoming from work friends or those at the golf

club? I doubt it. When it comes to real friendship, the church family is where you can find the real thing.

Consider the relationship between parents and children. A recent report by UNICEF compared parenting habits in the UK, Sweden and Spain. In Britain, parents tend to give their children expensive toys and holidays, electronic gadgets and high-status



brands; yet children said they would have preferred attention, love and time.

Through a Christian charity from which my family has substantially benefited, children and adults are taught how to say prayers, study the Bible and form lasting friendships with like-minded people. That experience is altogether deeper and longer-lasting than any material gift. You can witness the generations bonding, as the older generation gives the next an identity to grow into, ideals to aspire to and a set of habits of gratitude and self-restraint that allow families to face life's hazards with confidence and courage. In terms of family and true community, that's the real McCoy.

Then look at status. Our "success-driven" secular society laughs at those who take faith and church seriously, labelling them "Bible bashers" or "God botherers", and concluding they are weak and deluded. Instead, people are judged by how much they earn and the status of the job titles they may – only temporarily – hold.

The Power of Community

In "Alive" churches, on the other hand, people are valued for how much they give – whether it's

money, time, hospitality, help to those in need or support to those who are facing a crisis. Materialism, selfishness and drivel like, "I did it my way" have combined to create a world of false values and despair. Only in faith communities will you find friendship that's real.

Now to happiness. I founded ZANE to assist those in acute difficulty in Zimbabwe – a country where there's no NHS or social services provision if you're lonely or sick, and where

thousands are likely to die alone in despair and squalor. That's real poverty. It's surpassingly strange that despite the cost-of-living crisis in the UK, we are in fact affluent beyond our grandparents' wildest dreams. However, we never cease to complain about our lot while

the demand for antidepressants and the incidence of alcoholism and drug abuse continue to soar.

In churches and synagogues, you will find something different. There's no precise word for it – the Jewish tradition calls it *simcha*, usually translated as "rejoicing", an emotion you can only experience in the company of others. Well-led local groups and organisations can generate this emotion, as can regiments in the army, but it comes

The Jewish tradition calls it *simcha*, usually translated as "rejoicing", an emotion you can only experience in the company of others.

into its own in churches and places of worship. It's best translated as "joy shared". So, I'm borrowing the great word *simcha* from my Jewish friends.

In "Alive" churches, people come together to celebrate an engagement, a forthcoming marriage, a wedding, a baptism or a thanksgiving for a well-lived life – people sing and rejoice together. That's *simcha* – a joy shared is a joy multiplied. It's a world away from the illusory happiness generated by the advertising industry and the self-centred mirage of the pursuit of desire.

I learned late that happiness, like true friendship, trust, altruism, virtue, enduring values and real relationships, is most readily achieved in community. In an age when face-to-face communities are in steep decline, they are still strong in "Alive" churches.

So, ignore the world of brands and bling and find a vibrant church. Unlike the culture of advertising and dreams of ever-more "stuff", friendship and *simcha* are the true treasure.

Things That Irritate...

- Being forced to listen to a piece of music with the words, "You're really going to enjoy this."
- Being asked to watch a video with the promise, "It's hilarious."
- People who respond to "How are you?" with "I'm good".
- Well-intentioned people who sign cards simply "Mary" – we might know six!
- Greeting cards that say "Seasonal" or "Festive" greetings (much favoured by Lib Dem councils desperate not to offend anyone), instead of "Happy Christmas".

I learned late that happiness, like true friendship, trust, altruism, virtue, enduring values and real relationships, is most readily achieved in community.

Love, Actually

11 September – Day 11: Woolhampton to Burghfield, Reading

Our host tells me that he met his present wife at her late husband's funeral.

Speaking of unlikely circumstances, when told that a cupboard was too cramped for intercourse to have taken place, a Stockport judge observed: "Over the years, I have come to the view that people will have sex anywhere ... except on the ceiling."

I Did It My Way

I lament the report of the Centre for Social Justice that informs us that the near total collapse of marriage as an institution is predominantly among younger people. So young marrieds are today counter-cultural radicals – that's more than sad. As a result, we in the west are emotionally and spiritually poorer because of our insistence on independence over interdependence.

"Take back control" was the most effective slogan in the past decade because we have come to desire autonomy in our lives – and Frank Sinatra's song "I Did It My Way" summarises the mood. But marriage, sharing, having kids and the heavy responsibilities we assume shatters the illusion we can do it on our own. An African proverb tells us, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." But that apart, from a practical viewpoint, marriage is the best welfare system ever devised. Research shows that children born within a stable marriage

outperform and are happier than those brought up by single mothers (many of whom struggle heroically in adverse circumstances, and against all the odds, bring up wonderfully balanced and successful children).

The chattering classes seem to rejoice at the destruction of the nuclear family. But with one in five of the adult population taking antidepressants, mental illness amongst the young soaring, and Britain having some of Europe's highest levels of drug and alcohol-related harm, am I being a dinosaur to wonder if these issues are linked to family breakdown? Just asking. And while I'm at it, why not encourage families to look after our old and infirm instead of importing other people to do the job for us?

Our Marriage

Jane and I married in our early twenties. Of course we weren't ready, but in our day, we couldn't live together without acute social disapproval, so we had to get on

with it. There's never a perfect time to get married and have children, and there's always a reason to delay making the decision – the effect on jobs and money, wondering if the other person is really “the one”, and what about the cost of housing? When are we ever ready?

In retrospect, Jane and I were mentally children, and we certainly had no idea of the baptism of fire that awaited us. Having little children is life-changing. I quote Michelle Obama: “They are terrorists. They have demands. They don’t talk. They are rotten communicators. They cry all the time. They are irrational. They are needy and you love them. So, you can’t blame them, right? So, you turn your frustrations on each other and get very angry.”

We survived. But what, in summary, have Jane and I learned? Our marriage has been like a mirror. I see Jane and she sees me at our worst and at our best. We continue to grow together in grace, compassion, commitment and trust. I was once asked by a group of singles what was the one quality needed to sustain a happy marriage, and I said, “Amnesia”. I have forgotten how Jane irritated me last week and she forgets how stupid I was yesterday.

We had to discover all this for ourselves, for there was no “marriage course” to warn us of the perils and pitfalls inherent in what we were facing – we just had to learn on the job. I recently re-read the “vows” we made all those years ago. They are terrifying, and I’m sure I had no



I THINK I'M READY TO START
A FAMILY NOW, GEORGE



concept of their implications at the time I made them. I now know they are vows, not easy promises to obey or ignore on impulse. They're big stuff, and we put our souls in peril if we treat them casually. We solemnly promised to stick by one another for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health – and, by the grace of God, we've managed to do these things.

At its toughest, our marriage has been a carousel of mistakes, apologies, reparative work, trying to put things right and learning as we go. Grief at the loss of beloved friends is no less painful with the passing of the years – we just get more used to handling the pain. The older we get, the better our marriage has become.

For Jane and me, marriage and

having our children has been the best investment we ever made for ourselves, and, ultimately, for our children and grandchildren.

Fifty Shades of Grey

As the years passed, we realised marriage wasn't skipping around among the flowers for decades on end. Being a parent is hard work, and it never ends; sometimes it's a great joy and other times it's boring, costly and worrying. And that's fine, for this is normal life.

For most people, happiness vanishes completely from time to time, and sometimes for a long time. However, experience tells us that it usually returns when we've stopped looking. Love, however, to quote the late Queen, does conquer all – although it takes its time about it and there are

often diversions along the way. But perfection doesn't exist.

I accept growing older. As the years pass, you become a person to whom more and more things have happened – good things, bad things, fantastic things, heartbreaking things, small everyday things that didn't count for much at the time, but which eventually, all together, meld into something valuable. They build us up and they flesh us out. Whatever insights we accumulate in the process – even if it doesn't seem like wisdom at the time – enrich us immeasurably as people. I have done most of my growing up since I was 50. And Jane has grown up too, although she started as a much wiser person than I was.

So, unless you are unusually clever and empathetic, the more life you have accumulated, the more clearly you can see things. As long as we don't get stuck in our ways – which only happens if we become frightened of the world – we become more tolerant, more flexible, kinder, more broadminded, more considerate, less inclined to knee-jerk reactions and are simply wiser than we were before. Jane and I can see both sides of an argument, understand that things are rarely binary and recognise that there are many gradations of shades of grey, from wispy cloud to the bottom of the stove.

Long live growing older!

Kicking the Can

12 September – Day 12: Burghfield, Reading to Shiplake

I've already discussed some of my five favourite topics (see my introduction if you need a reminder!) Here, then, are some thoughts on bereavement and money.

I have so much admiration for widows and widowers. Many of us will find ourselves alone one day... and we'll just have to get on with it, won't we? For what other choice is there? Our friends and family (if

we have a family) can, of course, do something to help, but they'll have their own lives to get on with – and can only attend to our needs and misery as a PS to their own lives.

Someone wise once told me that she could usually find someone to do something with, but she could never find anyone to do nothing with. And, of course, so much of married life is sitting contentedly with one's mate, doing nothing.

Facing the Truth

And now to money...

The realities of our predicament were starkly laid out by Angela Merkel in 2012: "Europe accounts for 7 per cent of the world's population, 25 per cent of its economy and 50 per cent of its social welfare expenditure."



The second reality is that the UK can never raise more than 38 per cent of GDP from taxation. It's spending 44 per cent. That 6 per cent deficit has to be borrowed – and lenders are getting mighty edgy.

That's the shape of the truth: we can't afford to go on like this.

To pay for our present excesses, our politicians are shunting the bill to our grandchildren on the nation's credit card. We have run deficits in 47 of the last 51 years. Bond yields (the cost of borrowing money) are higher than ever. This is what happens when politicians keep avoiding essential structural reforms – eventually, the problems will eat you alive.

The iron law of life is that when there's no pain, there's no gain. Jean-Claude Juncker – once President of the EU – claimed in a rare sober moment: "We all know what we have to do; the problem is that if we do it, no one will vote for us ever again!" Yet Churchill promised only "blood, toil, tears and sweat," while Thatcher was desperately unpopular as she led us through tough reforms – remember "The lady's not for turning"? It was vital for a brighter future. The same tough messages were delivered by Attlee, Konrad Adenauer and Roosevelt. So, it can be done.

I wish Andy Burnham well. Let's hope he's more than a nice guy.

He must deal with welfare. In so doing, he has to deal with the opposition of his Labour MPs, the majority of whom have no commercial experience whatsoever. Burnham must cut billions from our unaffordable national bill, encouraging many millions into work.

He simply has to state that if his Labour MPs don't support this essential legislation, he will do what Major did over Maastricht and threaten to call an election.

Warren's Wisdom

Warren Buffett offers five rules for not going broke:

1. Never buy a new car.
2. Never spend, say, £5,000 or more on a holiday.
3. Never stretch yourself to the limit when buying a house.
4. Never spend money on buying new furniture all at once.
5. Invest your savings with experienced managers in the stock market. Over 100 years, the stock market has easily beaten house appreciation, and, despite many savage corrections, it always bounces back.

Dull and Void

13 September – Day 13: Shiplake to Aston

I must admit that boredom used to be a fear of mine, though I don't think I'm alone in this.

This walk is anything but boring – but what do we do to drive that feeling away when we're sitting idly on a bus or waiting for a friend who's running late for a coffee? We reach for a stream of entertainment from a screen or headphones – anything to conquer our fear of having nothing to do.

Frank Sinatra admitted he'd believe anything to get him through the night. Marilyn Monroe claimed to believe in everything... just a little bit. Lying awake at 4am, we face reality – death is a day nearer, booze only pretends to deaden reality, spontaneous sex is but a memory, and much of life seems tedious and pointless. So, what's the bloody point? Oh God, we face the same crappy TV, earning money... or not earning it, and unpayable tax bills. We realise that Ecclesiastes' "life is meaningless" is an understatement. Have we enough pills? Are those men in white coats running over the hills coming for me?

We face fear. Best turn up the music.

Oscar Wilde said, "It's absurd to divide people into good or bad. People are either charming or tedious" and then, "Boredom is the greatest sin". But be of good cheer because Oscar was plain wrong.

Turn it Off

There's an alternative to addictive games and pot and pills, for there's something positive to be said about boredom. When a teenager opines that Shakespeare's a "bore" and reaches for the rubbish to which they're addicted, they are saying more about themselves than Shakespeare. Wilde's quip is more about him than the people he was talking about. We need space in our life, a time to brood. So, turn off the devices. Would Keats have written what is arguably one of the finest poems in the English language – "Ode to a Nightingale" – at 23 if he had been addicted to the likes of "WarGames" on a screen?

The poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko writes that there are no boring people in the world – each person has a world that's all their own.

And there are different kinds of boredom. The classic scholar Peter Toohey distinguishes between



"simple boredom" (when, for example, you're waiting in a traffic jam) and "existential boredom" (the kind experienced by characters in Russian novels, a deep weariness with the world). Toohey argues that boredom is an adaptive emotion, designed to help us flourish. Boredom is necessary because without the ability to delay gratification and tolerate inactivity, who can devote the time and patience necessary to master the skills required to practise any profession – the law, the church, the military, accountancy or music?

Every now and again boredom, emptiness and the meaninglessness of life drive the desperate towards oblivion. Let's get wasted, furiously gamble or seek paid-for porn or sex – mirages to deaden the pain.

In ancient times, the Desert Fathers decided to face boredom head-on (they called it "acedia") by retreating to the desert to live lives dedicated to silence and prayer. They understood the futility of human existence, realising that we were never meant to be wholly satisfied with the tinsel of this world – we are made for more.

However, desert life is a tad extreme for most. So, what's the answer? Pascal argued that much of our unhappiness comes from our inability to sit quietly by ourselves, even in the comfort of our own room, without needing to be entertained or distracted. Perhaps, then, one answer is to savour the shape of a flower, appreciate music, consider the delicate beauty of a bird in flight, gaze at a glorious sunset, understand

what's going on behind that look on someone's face and appreciate the sheer particularity of what's happening around us.

The Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper writes that the world has forgotten how to worship:

"The vacancy left by absence of worship is filled by mere killing of time and by boredom, which is directly related to inability to enjoy leisure; for one can only be bored if the spiritual power to be leisurely has been lost."

So, boredom has a vital place. It can teach us patience – it can slow us down and it can be a gateway to wisdom. Best to bring it on.

Thought for the Day

**"Throughout the world,
the more wrong a man does,
the more indignant is he
at wrong done to him."**

Anthony Trollope

Guilty Until Proven Innocent

14 September – Day 14: Aston to Bourne End

We enjoyed a wonderful evening yesterday as we sought to put the world to rights.

Today, as we walked, I recalled a Chinese proverb quoted by Jung Chang in *Wild Swans*: "Where there is a will to convict, there will always be evidence."

It set me thinking about the health authority I chaired for some years. There was a woman in charge of recruiting, let's call her Yvonne. She cherished a cluster of ingrained prejudices about university graduates that she took pleasure in sharing with anyone with a pulse. Graduates, opined Yvonne, were impractical,

opinionated, work-shy, prone to lateness, often with questionable hygiene, of dubious moral character and, worst of all, drug addicts. Very occasionally, there would be sufficient evidence to bolster her absurd views, allowing her to savour her rightness with lip-smacking relish.

Yvonne's game is played out every day – and when it's played by heads of state, it can result in nations going to war. Putin, for example, has repeatedly characterised the Ukrainian leadership as Nazis. Once the conviction is established, evidence can always be found to support it. People lose their homes, have their lives destroyed and are killed – recall what Putin did to Alexei Navalny.

When it plays out in the media, the outcome may not appear so drastic, but it can be ruinous for the victims. Once a paper has developed the will to convict, it's only a matter of time before the "evidence" is published, often backed up by a picture from a mobile phone. Check the press coverage of Badenoch, Burnham and Farage – why wasn't he or she grieving over some disaster? Then find a picture of him or her with a drink in their hand...

Proof Positive

Recall the picture of disgraced former ambassador to the US, Peter Mandelson, peeing against a wall – which of us hasn't had an "al fresco pee" at some time or another? Yet the photograph carried an implication – that Mandelson should somehow be displaying repentance for his sins, some gravitas.

It's an unfair world. Most of us would plead guilty to passing judgement, without evidence, on the people we know and the celebrities we don't.



The consequences are unlikely to be as dramatic or as cruel as what happened to Alexei Navalny, but they can nevertheless be devastating for those who end up with ruined reputations.

Consider the villain Iago's words in Shakespeare's *Othello*:

*"Who steals my purse steals trash.
'Tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been
slave to thousands;
But he who filches from me
my good name
Robs me of that which not
enriches him
And makes me poor indeed."*

Thought for the Day
**Artificial intelligence is no
match for natural stupidity...**

This Blessed Plot

15 September – The Day After

So, at last, we've completed our walk. It's quite a moment. Over the years, Jane and I, along with various dogs, have covered more than 3,300 miles around Britain – in fact, it's getting hard to find anywhere we haven't walked!

As I mentioned at the outset, we're very grateful to the hosts who have been so generous to us. The only problem I have to warn them about is not to be startled if they wake up to find me wandering round their bedroom at 3am. I'm simply trying to find the loo.

Let me also mention our driver, Richard Moyle, again. This is the sixth walk he's helped us with and, as always, he's been kind and considerate while also vastly competent – and he never fusses. What a gift he is! He's become a good friend to us both, and, of course, to Moses.

Inventors and Innovators

Political hacks tell us that the UK is "broken".

Really? There are 2.3bn people worldwide who speak English; it's the accepted language of the internet and universally used in trade and navigation. We are the home of Shakespeare, the Magna Carta

and the Mother of Parliaments. We created basic human rights, contract law, the basics of international trade, the Greenwich Meridian and the laws of longitude and navigation. The UK was the home of the first Industrial Revolution, the birthplace of railways.

We are a permanent member of the UN Security Council and one of the founding members of the United Nations. The first meeting of the UN General Assembly was held in London. We are a nuclear power, a cornerstone of the NATO Alliance and the driving force behind the creation of the Commonwealth. Eighty years ago, the UK stood alone against tyranny and in support of freedom; we stood by our allies. We were at the forefront of the abolition of slavery, and we provide a sanctuary to the persecuted.

The UK has just overtaken India as the fifth-largest economy in the world. London is the world's leading financial centre, and a world leader in fintech, medical research and AI. The UK's financial and legal sectors

OK...BUT APART
FROM ALL THAT, WHAT'S
GREAT ABOUT
GREAT BRITAIN?



and its reputation for integrity are the envy of the world.

The World Wide Web was invented by a Brit, Sir Tim Berners-Lee. Alan Turing was the father of AI, and we created Google DeepMind. The UK has more “unicorn” billion-dollar businesses than France and Germany combined. In sport, we invented football, tennis, cricket and rugby, and founded the Paralympic movement. The UK’s Premier League is the most watched sporting event in the world, broadcast in more than 200 countries. We created Formula One – the most technical of all sports – and seven of the 10 teams are UK-based.

The UK is the Land of Enlightenment. Hume, Smith and Locke were British, while Newton’s laws of motion and Darwin’s theory of evolution continue to shape our understanding of the world. It’s also the home of medical innovation – Fleming discovered

penicillin, while British scientists pioneered CT and MRI scanning as well as IVF. British researchers made major contributions to understanding DNA – the building block of life itself – and are at the forefront of vaccine development. The UK is home to four of the world’s top 10 universities while Britons have won 148 Nobel Prizes, second only to the US. The University of Cambridge alone is affiliated with more Nobel Prizes than Germany.

Broken... really?

What, then, is it that has held this country together through a thousand years of upheaval? Here are three very different voices reflecting on that question...

“This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.”

Richard II, Act 2, Scene 1

“And what should they know of England who only England know?”

Rudyard Kipling,
“The English Flag”, 1891

“Tell us what it is that binds us together; show us the clue that leads through a thousand years; whisper to us the secret of this charmed life of England, that we in our time may know how to hold it fast.”

Speech by Rt Hon Enoch Powell
to the Royal Society of St George,
22 April 1961

(With apologies to Scotland, Wales etc.)

Impressions of the Walk



Starting off



Guest walkers providing welcome company



A welcome pit stop for Tom and Jane – courtesy of Richard's wonderful driving service.



Not every day was sunny!



Jane's Journal

Bristol to Bourne End

Day 1

I can hardly believe that a year has gone by since Tom and I finished our last sponsored walk for ZANE. There was a lot of discussion in the spring about where we should go this year – bearing in mind that we needed to find a reasonably flat route with no dangerous B-roads to navigate, no ploughed fields and enough kind donors along the way who were prepared to give us and our driver, Richard, beds for the night.

We came to realise that our best bet was probably to follow one of the many canals that traverse the country. I was rather sad about this as I've always enjoyed our cross-country adventures and the uncertainty of what might come next. I felt that walking along a canal for 14 days might be rather dull! However, I had to concede that given our combined age of 164, perhaps this idea was more sensible – and at least we can't possibly get lost!

We finally settled upon the Kennet & Avon Canal. It was completed in 1810 to link the River Avon at Bath with the river Thames at Newbury, creating an important trade route from Bristol to London for transporting coal, timber, grain and other goods. The opening of the Great Western Railway in 1841

badly affected the canal's freight trade. By the end of the Second World War, when it was hardly used commercially and had fallen into a dilapidated state, it was decided that the canal should be closed, prompting a groundswell of protest from local people.

A major restoration campaign, led by volunteers and organisations including the Kennet & Avon Canal Trust, gradually restored the canal – and it was finally reopened by Queen Elizabeth II in 1990.

We started our walk in the harbour basin of the River Avon in Bristol, having enjoyed a comfortable night's stay with a supporter in her beautiful ground-floor flat in one of the large, imposing Edwardian houses in Clifton.

We met up with one of our grandsons, Isaac, and his girlfriend, Issy, who were joining us for the day as it was a bank holiday. The old harbour area has been attractively restored with many of the old redundant warehouses turned into flats, restaurants, clubs and bars overlooking the river – making it a very popular area for young people. Isaac pointed out many of the bars and clubs he had frequented during his student days.

I HAVE A SUDDEN CRAVING
FOR A BAR OF FRUIT AND NUT!



The river winds through the city and we passed the place where the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston was notoriously thrown into the river some years ago. Then we circumnavigated the imposing Victorian Bristol Temple Meads Station before meeting up with Charles, a ZANE trustee, and his wife, Angela, who will walk with us for the next few days.

As we left the city, we passed the huge Cadbury chocolate factory, now turned into flats, and then continued along pleasant, wooded pathways busy with dog walkers – stopping to chat with some of them. The river was low due to the hot, dry summer, making the banks too steep for Moses to go down for a swim. We noticed the water was very brown in colour – not conducive to

human swimming despite the warm weather.

We enjoyed lunch in an attractive pub called the Chequers, before finishing our walk at the Lock Keeper pub in Keynsham. Altogether a very pleasant first day.

Day 2

Leaving Keynsham, we continued east along the left bank of the Avon. It was a lovely day with a cool breeze, perfect for walking. The path was quieter today, as yesterday's walkers had disappeared.

This stretch passed through very pretty woodland, although Moses was very unhappy at having to walk across a long footbridge with metal slats pointing upwards – not at all

dog-friendly and very uncomfortable for his poor paws! He crept along it, looking quite miserable. The river was lined with numerous barges and motor launches, while behind us was an untidy industrial area – though it was not at all clear what was happening there.

The river began to flow through farmland with the hills of the Cotswolds to our left. There must have been much more rain here than we've had in Oxfordshire, as the farmers had already planted winter wheat, which was visibly growing. Unlike yesterday, the river was no longer a dark, muddy brown but looked clear and healthy – whatever was being pumped into it downstream was now behind us!

After a pleasant couple of miles, we met up with our fellow walkers at the point where we were supposed to cross the river using a disused

railway line, which is currently being renovated. Unfortunately, we had to climb onto the line to cross, but there was no way down to the river path on the other side. After consulting some cyclists and a couple of people working on the line, it was clear we'd have to continue along the old railway, which would eventually bring us back to the river further along at Saltford.

We rejoined the river path, passing close by the gardens of several permanently moored houseboats. Brass and copper goods were made at Saltford and the Saltford Brass Mill on the edge of the river is now a museum. It was in production from 1721 to 1925 and was one of many such mills along this stretch of the river. The Great Western Railway runs close to the river here, so it was all rather noisy. Eventually, though, the river wound away, and we left the railway line behind us.



On the hilltop across the river, we saw the imposing Georgian manor house of Kelston Park, which must enjoy incredible views. Moses was now able to clamber down the steep banks of the river for a much-needed drink. We too were pleased to be stopping at the Boat House for lunch – after which we felt much refreshed and made good progress towards Bath on a well-maintained footpath.

As we neared the end of our walk, we passed Dutch Island on the outskirts of Bath – an artificial island named after the skilled Dutch workers who were brought over to work in the brass mills along this stretch of the river.

Day 3

Today we were joined by two new walkers, as well as Charles and Angela. We made our way along well-maintained paths into the centre of Bath, where we left the River Avon and joined the Kennet & Avon Canal – passing by a series of very deep locks. These raise the water level by 65 feet at Widcombe Lock, the deepest of them all.

For nine miles, there were no more locks, as the water is pumped up from the river below at Claverton pumping station. It was designed by John Rennie – the mastermind behind the construction of the canal between 1794 and 1810.

The machinery he installed uses waterpower to pump the water

uphill. When the sluices are opened, the flow of the river turns a massive waterwheel. Through a system of wheels, gears, cranks and rods, it operates huge beam engines. These drive the pumps, forcing the water up to the canal. The machinery is remarkably quiet when in action.

Today, a modern back-pumping system ensures the canal is always full and, thanks to a lottery grant awarded between 1996 and 2002, the canal bed no longer leaks.

We passed the attractive George Inn at Bathampton, close to where the factory that once produced Plasticine stood. In 1897, William Harbutt, a former headmaster of Bath School of Art and Design, created this modelling material. A mixture of lanolin, coloured chalk and other ingredients, Plasticine was initially rolled into sheets using his garden roller. Recognising the potential of his invention, he packaged it in small quantities and sold it to art shops in Bath. It proved very popular, and demand soon led to the establishment of a factory at Bathampton. In 1963, the factory was destroyed by fire but was quickly rebuilt – and it continued making Plasticine for another 20 years before production was moved elsewhere.

As we made our way along the canal, we enjoyed the creative gardens beside many of the moored barges. Eventually, we arrived at the Dundas Aqueduct – one of two aqueducts on this stretch of the canal, carrying the waterway over the River Avon



and the railway. It's considered a masterpiece of nineteenth-century architecture and is an amazing sight, with the river and railway far below. We captured a delightful picture of a single swan swimming along below us.

A further two miles took us along a wooded stretch of the canal, with extremely steep banks on either side. A number of large trees had obviously fallen across the canal, creating an avalanche of debris – which must have caused problems for the Canal & River Trust.

We ended our walk at Semington Bridge, where we said goodbye to our companions.

Tom and I were on our own today, with no other walkers joining us. After waving goodbye to Richard, we set off along the canal – only to realise after five minutes that Moses was missing. I rushed back to the start, and there he was with Richard. Luckily, Richard – who was just about to drive away – had spotted Moses standing outside the car in his wing mirror! The silly dog must have followed him back, but thankfully, all was well.

We made our way along a peaceful stretch of the canal, with the railway and river close beside us on our right. We soon came to Avoncliff, the second aqueduct built by John Rennie across the valley. It proved a difficult project, as the narrowness of the river valley meant that the canal had to negotiate sharp bends both before and after the aqueduct. Soon after its completion, the aqueduct began to leak because of the poor-quality limestone used to line it. Over the next 150 years, the stones were regularly replaced. In 1954, when the canal was saved from closure, the aqueduct was finally drained, and a concrete lining was installed over the next 18 years. We got a bit lost trying to find our way around this section as the signage was rather unclear.

On the outskirts of Bradford on Avon, we passed a huge, beautifully restored tithe barn, which our hosts later told us serves as an important community space for local residents. The town was an important



manufacturing centre until the mid-nineteenth century, when much of its textile industry moved north during the Industrial Revolution.

As we left Bradford on Avon, the canal led us through a quiet, wooded stretch, with only the occasional barge passing by. Further along, we reached a busy marina and boat-building yard. The walk seemed particularly long this morning, and the temperature was much warmer than over the past few days. We were both feeling rather exhausted and were very pleased to see Richard at 1.30pm. I've noticed this often seems to happen a few days into our walks!

We lunched well at a garden centre before continuing along a very busy stretch, with barges parked nose to tail along our side of the canal. I

enjoyed spotting the many different types: there were the holiday-let barges, very neat and functional, and then the more permanent homes, beautifully kept, all with miniature gardens on their roofs, as well as two or three solar panels. Then there were the more alternative lived-in barges, in poor condition and carrying everything but the kitchen sink on the roof – and usually with an angry terrier guarding their home! There are always a number of broken-down, unoccupied boats, and I wonder what happens to them in the end.

The canal was now becoming very narrow with bulrushes on both sides, making it difficult for two barges to pass each other. I wondered why this hadn't been cleared by the Canal & River Trust, who seem to be doing a good job elsewhere.

We finished our day at Semington Bridge, feeling quite weary, and happy to stop.

Day 5

Having returned to Bradford on Avon, we spent a happy evening with good friends of our daughter, who welcomed us into their beautifully restored home in the centre of town.

Back in Semington this morning, we set off at a good pace towards Devizes. It was a beautiful sunny day, and it felt good to be alive. We met up with Derek, who lives locally, and his very active black cocker spaniel –

they both joined us for a few miles. The canal here winds through lovely countryside, and we enjoyed the peace and quiet.

Further along, we were joined by Bob and Margaret, who are long-term supporters of ZANE. They accompanied us on two previous walks, and it was lovely to see them again.

Margaret walked with us until we stopped for lunch at a pub in Poulshot. Unfortunately, Bob and Margaret had a bit of a panic when they realised that neither of them had the car key, which they had left in the marina car park where we'd



met them. Bob and Richard returned to search for it while we waited in the pub. Sadly, despite looking everywhere, no key was found. After lunch, the three of them returned to the car park to search again while Tom and I continued towards the Caen Hill locks, just outside Devizes.

These locks climb a steep section of the landscape, raising or lowering the canal by approximately 237 feet over a distance of two miles. The flight consists of 29 locks, including a main staircase of 16, with the remaining locks spaced above and below. Historically, boats needed a substantial amount of water to pass through them, leading to the development of the nearby Caen Hill Reservoir and pumping arrangements.

With the decline of the Kennet & Avon Canal during the early twentieth century, the Caen Hill section became overgrown and fell into disrepair. Following a major restoration project, the canal reopened in 1990. Caen Hill is now a major heritage site and an extraordinary example of Georgian engineering.

Walking alongside these incredible locks was an amazing experience, and we were fascinated to watch boaters working hard to guide their barges through them.

We finished our day on the outskirts of Devizes. Richard later told us that Bob and Margaret had found their car keys on the roof of their car – thank goodness! Margaret had also left us

two boxes of homemade flapjacks and cakes. Bless her!

Day 6

Our hosts of last night joined us, and we then met up with three other walkers who came up from London for the day. It was another beautiful day – the route was pretty and conversation flowed easily between us all. As it was a Saturday, many barge owners were sitting out on the towpath and we enjoyed brief chats with some of them – as well as some musical entertainment along the way!

I spotted the putrid remains of a fish on the path and kept a close eye on Moses to ensure he steered clear of it. Unfortunately, he must have gone back to investigate, as he returned stinking of dead fish! Further along, we passed the best barge garden we've seen so far. The whole roof was covered with trailing variegated ivy, with white petunias peeping through. It looked stunning.

David and Antonia, our hosts with whom we're staying for two nights, parted ways with us, and we continued on our way. We lunched at an old mill farm that has become a thriving café, serving a large selection of salads and cakes. I tried to wash the stinking Moses with an outdoor hose, but with little success!

We finished in good time at Cocklebury Farm, where an ancient mound called the Swanborough



Tumuli is marked by a stone commemorating the meeting of King Alfred the Great and his brother, Aethelred, in 875 AD. The brothers were on their way to fight the marauding Vikings, and legend tells that they promised their land to each other if one of them was killed. The story doesn't relate what happened next, but we know that King Alfred survived.

Day 7

Today was our last day before heading home for our day off. Sim, who walked with us yesterday and stayed with David and Antonia last night, was still with us. A Zimbabwean in his early thirties, he's a very proficient runner and spent much of the morning running ahead of us, taking photos and then returning.

It was another stunning day and the temperature rose steadily. Most of the day was spent on a tree-lined path, which made for a very pleasant

walk. We came across several groups of fishermen, all with very long poles, which we hadn't seen before. At first, I thought that the fish on the far side must be better. However, I soon realised the men were filling a small cup at the end of their poles with maggots, dropping them into a particular spot and then returning to that same spot with their rods. They told us it was a much more effective way to fish, although we didn't see any particularly impressive catches. One man did say that he had caught a big perch that morning and was clearly delighted. I got the impression that the fishermen, who always seemed to be men, were deeply competitive!

We watched a heron standing on a barge railing, totally unconcerned by our presence as we stood just beside it, taking pictures. This was very unusual, as in my experience, herons are shy of humans.

Arriving at Burbage Wharf, we saw the large wooden crane that stands



on the far side of the canal. This is a replica of a crane used in the nineteenth century to lift wood onto barges for transportation along the canal.

Back in Wootton Rivers, we lunched in a pretty thatched pub, which was pleasant enough although the service was slow – probably because it was a Sunday. Further along, the canal disappears into the 460-metre-long Bruce Tunnel. Built in 1810, it was paid for by the then Lord Ailesbury, who owned the land. At some point, the railway must have been built over the canal, as on our return journey, we noticed that the canal was now on the other side of the tracks.

We met a canoeist on the far side who was debating whether to risk going through the tunnel as he didn't have a torch. We pointed out that

the barges would surely have lights and would be able to see him, so he decided to continue. Hopefully he was OK!

We finished at Wolf Hall Farm, a big dairy farm. As we walked up the track, we passed a grandfather and child in a pony and trap out for a spin. Through the trees, we caught a glimpse of Wolf Hall, a large Tudor mansion made famous by Hilary Mantel's novel, which tells the story of Thomas Cromwell.

Day 8

We arrived back after spending a couple of nights at home. I must say, our day off didn't turn out to be particularly restful as domestic issues crowded in on us – but it was lovely to sleep in our own bed!

Today was our first really wet day, so we got ourselves kitted out accordingly. Moses was not impressed by the prospect of rain, and we had to literally drag him out of the car! He was definitely very fed up.

Despite charging my walk phone with maps overnight, it wouldn't switch on – so Richard tried to charge it in the car.

We were joined by Katrina, who works for ZANE. It was very kind and

dedicated of her to come, as she's on holiday this week and it was raining – both reasons to stay in bed!

The rain continued steadily, but the gentle wind was behind us, so we barely noticed it. After all, we ought to be rejoicing as it's just what the farmers and us gardeners need. We passed a rather amusing sight on the opposite bank – a very colourful barge garden, complete with a huge tree pollarded about 8 feet up, and a huge plastic gorilla sitting on top!



The canal was deserted on this wet morning, with no walkers in sight and no movement inside the occupied barges. We passed the Crofton Beam Engines and their accompanying tower, which reminded us of the one we'd seen in Bath – although this one was more visible from the towpath. Sadly, it's only open and operational on one Thursday a month.

It's obviously been a very good year for hazelnuts, as the towpath was carpeted with them. Katrina and I were frustrated that we couldn't gather any. We both love hazelnuts, and I, for one, had never seen so many – usually, the squirrels get to them before I do!

There were a number of locks here as the gradient of the canal had changed. Previously, we had been travelling uphill as we headed east, but now the direction of the incline had reversed as we made our way towards the Thames.

We passed through Great Bedwyn and rather fancied a coffee on this damp, cold day. Luckily, Richard had brought mugs from home, a flask of hot coffee and some of Margaret's flapjacks from last week, which were still going strong. Bless him!

Coming into Little Bedwyn, we crossed the canal to walk to our lunch stop. Suddenly, the heavens opened, and we were caught in a deluge – not helped by the fact that we were now walking into the wind. We arrived at the Pelican Pub dripping wet.

Richard told me that he had taken the walk phone to a shop, where he was informed that it had become wet and rusted over time. We decided it would be more sensible to buy a reconditioned phone rather than risk having it repaired.

We said goodbye to Katrina, while Moses stayed in the car as he was shivering. The sun came out again, and we walked through Hungerford, finishing just on the other side of town.

Day 9

As we arrived at our start point, a car pulled up. It was David, a good friend of ours, who had driven past, hoping to bump into us – a lovely surprise. Sadly, he couldn't join us, but we had a quick catch up with family news. Some of it wasn't good, which was sad to hear.

It was a beautiful morning, so different from yesterday, and the canal looked very enticing with the sun shining through the trees as we set off. The River Kennet was on our left – it's a chalk stream, hence its lovely clear water. The Great Western Railway ran alongside us on our right but soon crossed over the canal.

After about a mile, we came across a group of Canal & River Trust workers: four on a motorised raft and a fifth in a wetsuit, preparing to put on his full diving gear. He explained that he was about to make his way through a tunnel that runs from the canal,



under the railway line and into the river beyond, to inspect its condition. It seemed to us a horrible and dangerous task, but he assured us it was a routine inspection. Further on, we spotted the men in the raft, busy clearing debris from a stream near the railway.

We met up with Richard at Kintbury, who explained we'd be returning there for lunch since there was nowhere suitable further along.

Passing a car park, we noticed an old Hillman Imp van advertising horse-drawn barge trips, which intrigued us. Sure enough, there were plenty of horse droppings on the path and the imprints of very large hooves. However, we also noticed that the bulrushes were very tall along this stretch of the canal, and numerous

barges were moored alongside the bank. A horse pulling a non-motorised barge seemed impossible!

Then, two miles further on, we came to a lock where two men were pulling a barge through by hand. On the other side, we spotted the horse, waiting to be reattached to the boat. According to his handler, he's a 12-year-old Cob and Shire horse cross – a huge, gentle beast who enjoys eating large mouthfuls of bulrushes as he slowly walks along the towpath, with the barge trailing behind him.

The barge had around 40 passengers, each of whom had paid £20 for a two-and-a-half-hour trip from Kintbury and back. The rope connecting the boat to the horse didn't seem to be hindered by the bulrushes, which

bent as the rope passed over them. When passing a moored boat, the rope was raised on a pole on the barge roof to clear the obstruction. We watched with interest as the boat was turned around to return to Kintbury – quite a complicated process!

We stopped at Marsh Benham before returning to Kintbury for lunch. When we resumed our walk along the canal, we noticed that the River Kennet briefly merges with it here before separating again into two meandering waterways. All along this stretch, we spotted Second World War pillboxes, some of which are now being used as storage spaces.

As we approached Newbury, the canal widened, and we passed numerous swans, Canada geese and ducks, which appeared to be congregating around the sluice gates. These regulate the amount of water flowing into the canal, helping to reduce the risk of flooding to nearby houses.

We finally arrived at Newbury Lock, in the centre of the town. When the decision was made to build the Kennet & Avon Canal in 1790, this was the first lock to be constructed by John Rennie.

Day 10

We stayed the night with our good friends Angus and Victoria. Angus, along with his dog, Tatty Bogul, has joined us on several walks before

and it was a joy to have him with us again.

As we made our way out of Newbury, the canal path was very busy with dog walkers and cyclists, but this soon diminished as we left the town behind.

It was another pleasant day for walking – and the canal was strewn with barges, especially as we passed a large marina and chandlers. We must have passed thousands of boats over the past 10 days. Assuming each barge on the canal pays some sort of mooring fee, it must bring a considerable income to the Canal & River Trust. However, the cost of maintaining such a complicated network of waterways must be considerable. I would be interested to know whether the Trust breaks even or actually makes a profit, how many people it employs and how much it relies on its teams of volunteers.

We met Richard at Thatcham Station for a coffee and then carried on past the large industrial estate at Colthrop. I was struck by the signs on the huge warehouses warning that the roofs are lined with asbestos and instructing anyone accessing them to use crawling boards. In this day and age, I'm surprised that the asbestos had not been removed!

On our right was a large gravel pit, with conveyor belts sorting the various sizes of stones and sand into huge piles. Many of the freight trains that had passed us appeared to be carrying gravel.



It was getting hot now and Tatty Bogul found a place where she could scramble down into the canal for a swim, while Moses was able to follow for a paddle. I think his days of swimming for pleasure are over!

We stopped at a junction to meet Richard, who had found a pub for lunch at the end of the walk. We decided to drive there and then return to complete the walk afterwards.

After a good meal in the very busy pub – which was right beside the canal – we decided to walk back up the towpath to where we had stopped. It felt slightly strange walking in the wrong direction!

Day 11

We had a rather disrupted evening last night. One of our ZANE supporters had kindly booked us into the Berkshire Arms at Midgham, where we were also meeting them for supper. Unfortunately, due to a muddle, the hotel refused to allow dogs to stay overnight – although they were welcome in the restaurant. We managed to find an alternative at the Lodge at Newbury Racecourse, which was fine.

Today we were joined by our daughter Clare, son-in-law John and their cockapoo, Layla.



Rivers like the Kennet are unpredictable, varying in depth, width and flow, which made it difficult for vessels to navigate between Reading and Newbury in the eighteenth century. According to the noticeboard on the edge of the canal at Midgham, the next 11 miles presented the canal builders with a real challenge – how to overcome the 131-foot rise between Reading and Newbury without interfering with the water supplies needed by the local millers. To bypass the meandering river, they designed 11 miles of artificial channels, with 20 locks and numerous weirs and sluices – and it worked. Commercial barges were then able to carry their important cargo up and down this stretch of the river.

Most of the locks on this stretch were originally turf-sided, which was

cheaper and possible because of the abundance of water. The turf linings have now been replaced.

This is a beautiful stretch of canal. The river comes and goes, making the waterway wider and livelier. On either side, we glimpsed lakes, many of which began as gravel pits, now surrounded by mature trees. Waterfowl are abundant and the fishing is obviously good judging by the number of fishing platforms we could see around the lakes. Many of the fields were home to large numbers of young thoroughbred horses, so presumably there is a flourishing racing stud nearby.

We had a very jolly lunch in the Fox and Hounds in Sheffield Bottom, then completed our walk after passing under the M4.

Day 12

As we made our way along the towpath this morning, we found that the canal was still subject to numerous locks and weirs, some of them even more complicated because of the wide, meandering course of the Kennet and the surrounding lakes.

Later in the morning, we realised we were approaching the outskirts of Reading. After passing through an extensive industrial area, we came to a rather pretty stretch with numerous terraced houses on the other side. Many of them had created ingenious waterfront gardens to make the most of their position. This is a busy path used by Reading residents to get around the city away from the crowds. Unfortunately, though, the litter along the way made it less pleasant than it might have been.

At last, we came to the town centre, where the canal forms a central feature for the many shops and cafés built round it. Here we met up with Sim and Tsenka – who had been picked up from Reading Station by Richard – and enjoyed a cup of coffee before setting off together.

As the afternoon progressed, we realised we were nearing the end of the canal. From Bristol, the bridges are numbered in reverse order, and now, finally, here we were at Bridge Number 1! The canal runs into the Thames at this point – and what a fine sight it was: wide and dramatic, and filled with pleasure boats and canoes as it was a Saturday. The Thames Path felt so open compared to much of the canal, and it was a real pleasure to walk along the wide-open floodplains in this area. These are wildflower meadows, which must be a real picture in spring.



We had lunch in Sonning, finishing at the boathouse at Shiplake School.

Day 13

This was our penultimate day, and we were feeling satisfied that, all in all, it's been a good trip – although we're looking forward to not living out of a suitcase after tomorrow!

We returned to the Shiplake School boathouse, where we found a number of girls setting off in canoes of various sizes, followed by rafts manned by staff members. They looked as though they were enjoying themselves on this lovely morning. The forecast had been poor for most of the day, but so far, everything looked good.

Leaving the boathouse, we walked along a pleasant, albeit rutted, path beside a wood. There were a number of runners making the most of a Sunday morning. We walked to the

outskirts of Lower Shiplake, following the signs for the Thames Path.

Unfortunately, I hadn't noticed that John had prescribed a rather shorter route through the village, which I failed to follow. When we asked a local if we were on the right route, she assured us that we were, so we continued rather than retracing our steps. It turned out that we had walked probably half a mile further than we should have.

Having rejoined the correct route near the railway station, we thought all would now be well. Soon afterwards, however, we came across a sign saying that the Thames Path was closed ahead of us, with a very long diversion taking us well out of our way. According to a passer-by, the sign had been there for some time because work was being carried out on one of the locks on the river. He suggested continuing along the path for a little longer and then trying to cut through.



Further along, we met two very helpful women who confirmed that the path was closed and suggested another route – but warned that it would take us almost an hour longer. We had arranged for Sim and Tsenka to meet us in Henley, and they'd started walking towards us – only to find the path closed as well. They were trying to follow the diversion, so we proposed that they return to Henley and ask Richard to pick us up – which he kindly did. It seemed a good idea to have an early lunch before setting off again from the Henley side of the path closure.

Crossing the bridge at Henley, we saw the large grandstand used for the Henley Regatta. Our young companions decided to complete the last three miles at a run, so we waved them goodbye and continued at our own pace.

The river runs straight here, and is lined with large, expensive houses boasting highly manicured gardens. We passed many walkers coming towards us, some of whom looked exhausted. They were taking part in charity walks for various causes, some having walked 50 miles in two days – so it wasn't surprising they were feeling a little weary!

At the end of the regatta stretch, there's an island, obviously used for parties, and then the river takes a steep right-hand bend, almost doubling back on itself. Passing the lock and large weir at Hambleden, we ended our day at the village of Aston.

We drove to our end point at Bourne End to meet our walkers for the day, John and Alice. They left their car there and drove with us to Aston.

The Thames Path deviated here, taking us away from the river and through the Culham Court Estate. Back in medieval times, Culham Court was owned by the Bishop of Westminster, with the present house being built in 1781. It's a fine Georgian-style house overlooking the river, with extensive gardens and parkland.

We were slightly alarmed to see what looked like a long-legged sheep in the park, but on closer inspection, we realised it was a herd of white deer. Moses was off the lead and interested, but thankfully he showed no inclination to give chase.

Back at the river, we enjoyed a very pleasant walk to Hurley. This charming, medieval village grew up around Hurley Priory, which was dissolved during the reign of Henry VIII. Part of the priory is now the parish church, while the local pub was originally the guest house. The fine tithe barn is now used for village events.

There was a problem with the Thames Path, as two sections were closed, including a footbridge that would have taken us across the river and into Marlow. After our experience yesterday, with complicated deviations, mainly on busy main roads, we opted to miss this part

out and were driven to Marlow. Our original plan was to stop here for lunch, but it seemed too early to eat. Alice assured us that the picnic she'd brought was enough for four, so we decided to continue walking for another hour.

We stopped along the way and enjoyed Alice's delicious picnic at a table overlooking the river. It was fun watching the many boats passing by, and we admired the opulent houses and gardens on the other side. John and Alice needed to get to a physio appointment in Oxford by 3.30pm, so we set off with that in mind and arrived at Bourne End, hopefully giving them enough time.

It was a slightly bittersweet feeling knowing this was our last day of walking – as ever, it's been a really interesting two weeks. We saw some lovely things and learned a lot about the Kennet & Avon Canal and the extraordinary ingenuity of its designers and builders 250 years ago. We've stayed with and walked with so many kindly, generous people. We could not have done it without the pre-planning of our ZANE team and, not least, the kindness, sensitivity and diligence of Richard – who has looked after us all the way.

We've made it in one piece, and for that we are very grateful!



It could be me – it could be you...

In 2001, Harold*, 73, and his wife, Sarah*, lost their farm during Zimbabwe's brutal land invasions. Harold's mother was killed during the eviction, leaving the couple heartbroken.

Harold tried to rebuild his life. He took on several jobs, including working for a dairy and an agricultural firm. He also did voluntary work helping to secure compensation for displaced farmers.

Then cancer struck... Harold underwent a partial gastrectomy and chemotherapy. The side effects of this treatment have left him incontinent while he's gradually losing mobility – a problem that is likely to worsen over time.

Sarah suffered a stroke, which meant she could no longer work. With insufficient funds to cover Harold's medical expenses, his health rapidly deteriorated. The couple found themselves facing penury and despair.

After learning of their plight, ZANE stepped in to help. We funded the medical equipment Harold needs – he is now able to self-catheterise, while steroid tablets are helping to control his autoimmune condition. ZANE also provides them both with a regular food parcel.



Harold told us: *"We are so grateful for ZANE's help. It has improved the quality of my life immeasurably. This kindness means so much and has lifted our spirits after so much hardship. Please thank ZANE's generous donors."*

Thank you.

**Identities have been changed on grounds of security.*

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6. ZANE funded the first clubfoot correction programme in Zimbabwe. Fifteen treatment centres have been established
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"The charity thrives on its responsiveness, flexibility and lack of bureaucracy. Operationally, ZANE is frugal, focused and effective in delivering aid to the needy."

If you want to save a life, then please support ZANE.



“ZANE's work in Zimbabwe provides an essential lifeline of support for those who cannot help themselves. It is a wonderful charity and the money goes where it's needed.

Lord Hastings of Scarisbrick CBE

Chairman, ZANE Council of Reference

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”



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