

Walking Month

There are 16 National Trails in England and Wales, covering some of the best landscapes and a total of around 2500 miles (4000 km). These routes are a great way to get outdoors and do something active, improving mental and physical health, self-esteem and stamina as well as stimulating your senses and getting vitamin D.

The North Downs Way is one of these trails and contributes 153 miles (246 km) from Farnham, Surrey to the White Cliffs of Dover, Kent. There are two possible routes to take: southern via the White Cliffs or northern via Canterbury, but much of the route follows the footsteps of thousands of pilgrimages from history. So far on this walk I have completed Farnham to Cuxton in 5 days walking, covering about 70 miles and a total of 202 000 steps! The route has been overall easy to follow (although I recommend a guidebook) and a pleasant change of scenery from my current accommodation in central London, although this has meant it's easy to access by train to start and end each day.

The first section from Farnham to Guilford (11 miles) was completed on a sunny but cold day in late February where I was glad of having put on lots of layers and having a flask of hot tea. This section of the walk was mostly gentle and comfortably done in under four hours – a good thing as the sun was setting by the time I got to Guilford station.

A sunny and much warmer Sunday a few weeks later, I set off from Guilford and made it to Westhumble by 3pm (13 miles), however I was feeling good and knew I still had around three hours of light left so after some quick checking of trains and calculating distances I decided to also do the climb up Box Hill to start section 3 before calling it a day. I felt very successful after this day's walking because I had done rather a lot of hills in this section and made some good progress into the next section. The only thing I found difficult with this section was the limited signage for the North Downs Way which I have mostly found to be good in the rest of the walk. But the YMCA had bright yellow signs for their trails and runs which mostly also followed the North Downs so I managed to not get lost which I also considered to be doing quite good.

After completing my exams I found time to get out and walk 3 days in a row (Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday). I started by completing section 3 from Westhumble to Merstham (11 miles) and then continued on section 4 towards Oxted (8 miles), almost completing this section on Tuesday. At the start of Wednesday I did the last hour or so into Oxted and then continued into Otford (11 ¼ miles), this was good as it meant I didn't get confused between these very similar sounding places and end up at the wrong station, however it did mean I broke my journey with Woldingham station which was about 30 mins walk from the trail meaning I started Wednesday with the walk back to the trail before being able to make progress.

Thursday was probably my longest day of all, going from Otford to Cuxton (15 ½ miles), but this was also my most sociable section of the route. Shortly after setting off I fell into step with a local older woman who told me she was practicing for a 10km walk she was going to do to raise money for a charity that had been helping her husband following a sudden onset of a rare neurodegenerative disease. We walked together for around 90 mins during which she told me stories of her struggles with managing this sudden change as well as her family, the local area and how the route had changed since her children were small. Later on during this day I was walking through a country park

where another woman stopped me to show me treasures she had found while walking the dog there – pieces of metal from military equipment that had been buried in the mud and uncovered with the recent rains. She told me how they had used the park for training during the second world war and she often tries to come after its been raining to see what else she can find. Unfortunately Thursday ended worse than any other point in the walk so far, with rain starting towards the end of the day which hadn't been forecasted so although I had my waterproof I was still rather cold and wet by the time I got home. This was probably made worse by the long wait at the station, having got there to find there had been an issue with the line further down and all trains for the next two hours were cancelled! After a bit of searching and considering my options (and maybe a couple of tears over the idea of walking to the next station after the longest day yet) I found a page to say they had fixed the issue and the next train was coming sooner than expected – it all worked out fine despite the hiccups.

I had hoped to get out at least every other weekend to walk the North Downs Way and get it finished during April but sadly other commitments and personal issues meant this was not possible. So I am hoping to get out to do another three or four days to finish at the White Cliffs during National Walking Month (May) which should be around another 55 miles around the southern route. Following this I might decide to continue and follow the northern route of 45 miles, or find a new trail to explore...

Why not get your unit (or your leaders or even other friends) out to celebrate National Walking Month? Take a look at the Ramble Around the Region challenge for some ideas of how to get outside around you.

