

## BISMORE AND THE FIVE VALLEYS WALK

People who live around Stroud in Gloucestershire need no introduction to the Five Valleys Walk – or if they do, they must have arrived very recently (or be remarkably divorced from the community they live in). We Brookses decamped from London in the spring of 1986 (Bob in pursuit of cheaper office space) and not a few friends expressed concern about the location. A little while before that there had been a very serious outbreak of meningitis around here (mainly in Stonehouse, I believe) and it received protracted publicity in the national press. I think before that my only association with the word was the death of a classmate in infant school (near Grimsby, Lincolnshire) and I cannot remember that there was any general anxiety or advice in the village in 1955. The fact that from here to Australia parents are informed about, and on the alert for, the symptoms is due largely to the sterling work of the Meningitis Trust, renamed Meningitis Now – a charity set up as a direct consequence of the 1980s outbreak and based in Stroud.

I do not know who had the idea of fund-raising through a Sunday stroll – slog, rather – on a 21-mile circuit around Stroud, but I can possibly date the first Five Valleys Walk. The name, incidentally, comes from the fact that Stroud is centred where five steep-sided valleys meet. Four small rivers flow in to Stroud and combine as a fifth that flows out towards the giant Severn. (I think of Stroud as being at the centre of a starfish, but that's just me.) Well, I obviously missed the advance publicity. There must have been some, but dealing with marrying and leaving work and reproducing and moving and reproducing again in the space of two or three years meant I was a bit *non comp* around then. As it was, one Sunday at the end of September or beginning of October 1987, we were roaring up our very steep lane, trying to get to church before the beginning of our baby's christening, when we were brought to a dead halt by streams of walkers coming down. Oodles of them. We had to be quite antisocial in order to get to the church on time.

Learning that this charity walk was to be an annual event, some time later Sue Kimber and I set up a cake stall near Bismore Bridge and earned a few bob for Eastcombe primary school. The following year, I think, we had learned better than to piggyback on someone else's fundraising, and did it for the Trust. We sold tea and cake from Mum's cottage on Eastcombe Green, having learned that the walkers were coming up to a checkpoint there. Bob's Great Aunt Audrey, in her late 80s, hadn't a clue what was going on and when leaving the cottage was cross to see a teenager sprawling on her back (exhausted, truly) in the front garden. She dug her walking stick firmly into the girl's stomach and said 'Get up at once, you great soft thing!' Oh dear! A year later I had another christening to get to – and I learned later that Bernice Shelley had opened the front of Fairview so that walkers could have a cup of tea and, if they wished, use her loo. I joined her for several years with some of my baking – I think until her sad death in the late 1990s. By then the route had changed so that the walkers no longer had to do the killing climb up to the Eastcombe checkpoint from Bismore, only to have to retrace their steps down into the valley in order to resume the walk by crossing the bridge and scrambling up through the wood and past Ferris Court to Round Elm, the junction of Forty Acre Lane and the Lypiatt ridge lane. For a great many years the next checkpoint after Bismore was there – until the landowner fenced off the verge and that checkpoint was eradicated. These checkpoints were not only to mark off stages on the walkers' paperwork, but also so that the walk could be started or finished at any point on the circuit – or in other words walkers can call a

halt at any checkpoint. I should explain that a bus service runs past the checkpoints where possible, returning tired walkers back to Stroud bus station free of charge. This was advertised as an attraction of the walk, and several times I had obstreperous people collapse in our dining room and refuse to move until a bus was provided. This is only funny if you know the challenges of our lane... We also, every year, had to fill our Land Rover with walkers who arrived at the Bismore checkpoint after the walk had ended. This involved a little tour of our own, getting folks back to their home villages, or to where they had left their car. We persuaded the charity to add to the route a small loop between Fairview and Honeyhill so that we could run a proper refreshment stall here. Naturally we offered the use of our loo as well, though as the numbers grew the charity provided a Portaloo near our garages, I am happy to say. On the parking space outside we placed tables together (borrowed from the village hall, I think), bought a triple-width gazebo, and ran a flex out for a tea urn. There was also a double gas burner for pans of soup.

Having by then started catering for events, and cooking the annual Ladies' Dinner in Eastcombe Village Hall, I had become slightly less gungho about regulations, held a food hygiene certificate, and began respect people's allergies (though even at that time there were far fewer than there are now). I thought it highly unlikely that I could poison or offend anyone with vegetable soup, cake, tea, coffee, hot chocolate, and good fruit squash. I believed that the walkers should be given large portions and charged no more than 50p for things as they were already doing their very best for the charity – and frankly I was pretty irritated when someone turned up to do bacon sarnies, pizza, etc as I thought that took us into dodgy (and more expensive) territory. And I will say I was astonished and disapproving, not living in Stroud myself, when one child was holding up a queue of about 50 people while he pointed to one cake after another asking 'Has that got nuts in it?' There were no nuts used at all – am I mad? I elbowed my friend serving on the stall aside and said politely but firmly that if he had a nut allergy then he might have *nothing* from my kitchen. 'Oh,' said the mother I had not noticed behind him, 'he is not exactly allergic to anything but I do like him to be *aware*.' Gracious me.

By the time we had run this extravaganza for a few years Bob got out of the washing up, I am sure that was the prime motive (joke: there was always a truly wonderful team in the kitchen) by organizing a beer stall under the aegis of The Lamb at Eastcombe. The barrels, sorry, firkins (9 gallons each) stood there on the saw horse in the entrance to our garage and were a tantalizing sight, I am sure. One was donated by Uley Brewery and in time another was added, donated by Stroud Brewery. By then licensing regulations had changed and Bob took out an events licence himself. I seem to remember that Bob would only sell the beer during licensing hours, but he has just clarified this for me. The bar could not open until he had had breakfast – and that certainly did not include 9.30 in the morning, which is about when the Red Lion customers from Chalford Bottom used to reach our place... They were a bit emphatic about their displeasure... Bob's file indicates that he started selling beer in 2006 and finished in 2013. (Does this mean it is already 11 years since we shut up shop?)

The takings from the beer were kept separate and passed separately to the Trust. Over the years between us all we raised many thousands of pounds with the help of truly wonderful friends and family who turned up here on the day. We had a lot of fun, and I still get into trouble from those who miss it. We only really knew our achievement each year after the event, when the Trust would report 1200, 1600 –

whatever – had signed up to walk. Of course they did not all pass our house but by golly it felt like it! There came a time, however, when I (or rather my arthritic knees and my feeble brain) could not manage all the organizing, heavy work and responsibility on top of all the other duties bearing down on me. The Five Valleys Walk (last Sunday in September) goes on come hell or high water. The only time I attempted it myself we set off with another family far too late in the morning, and just made it to the only other pit-stop, Wycliffe School, before their barbecue finished. It was a rainy morning and I had no idea at the time that it was at all unreasonable to expect children aged four, five, six, eight and nine to walk 14 miles while cold and hungry. Indeed, there have been Eastcombe children who have *run* the whole thing... Whether you walk one stage or all, go for it! The scenery is unsurpassed and the natives are friendly.

Our children soon reached an age when they could walk without us. Felix and friend, aged 10, took our springer spaniel, aged six, and disappeared with happy nonchalance but rang up from Slad phone box by The Woolpack to say they could not find the checkpoint (having not looked at the map but blithely walked our usual cross-country route to Slad). I explained where the war memorial was and got back to work. They rang again to say the dog would not leave the pub and was too strong to be pulled – of course he wouldn't, he *knew* where to wait for Bob – who naturally drove to retrieve the three of them, and no doubt have a pint. On another occasion our daughter, 13, and a schoolfriend set off but I next saw them only about four hours later, huddled under rugs in the sitting room and drinking cocoa. It was hard to believe they had done 21 miles or so, but they had. 'Mum, Mum, you know where you come under the 419? It was flooded there, the water was up to our waists!' I opened my mouth to express horror and sympathy but they continued in unison, '*We went through it three times!*'

My happy memories centre on walkers and helpers, such lovely people; thank-you cards from around Britain; supportive family, friends and neighbours; well-exercised children and dogs; Jilly Cooper and dogs arriving with *SNAJ* reporter and photographer. Simon-next-door while serving on the stall had a dissatisfied customer who said there was a hair on her pizza. 'Oh what did you do?' I sighed. 'What could I do?' he replied. 'I ate it.' The Meningitis Trust had many charming volunteers and staff who smoothed our path and ran the checkpoint down here. Every year they ignored my plea that they should stop describing the Toadsmoor Valley as one of Stroud's five. It is *not*. OK? They expressed their thanks in the form of invitations to their annual reception and carols at Gloucester Cathedral, which we attended with pleasure for many years. My unhappy memories are few, being focused on people with loutish manners, and those who dropped litter around the house and up the track through the woods. The worst memory, which I should not even mention, is that halfway through one busy, sunny, happy Sunday afternoon in 2002 I received a telephone call from a friend in the Alps who said his wife, my closest friend from age 12, our daughter's godmother, had been killed on the road there. I have not the slightest idea how I got through the rest of that day in public, and frankly I suspect that from then on every year the walk day was probably tainted for me, and I was not totally sad to have to stop.

To those who helped with the hard work here in Bismore, to tolerant neighbours, to the Trust and most of all to the valiant walkers: our sincere thanks.

Muriel Brooks, Honeyhill, Bismore. December 2024