

**A Walk Along Offa's Dyke
By Pauline Beaton
Lifelong Javens Family Friend**

Looking at the first entry in my diary for memories of the walk that I did with Val Javens in May/June this year, I read:

"Bit depressed! So nervous about this walk this time – there seems to be so much more hype about walking now. I am so worried we will not be up to it and also that we will have bad weather which will make it miserable."

Anyone reading this on Colin's website will know that if inspiration was needed for what seemed at that point a rather daunting exercise for two old (well – middle-aged!), rather unfit (well – completely wobbly/muscle-less!) ladies (well – some may not agree here!), we had only to look to Val's awe-inspiring son, who undaunted by so many apparently insurmountable problems is now contemplating a trip needing huge amounts of courage and forward planning, not to mention large amounts of ready cash. Thanks to Derek Breed, Colin's main sponsor, all the money that Val and I had decided we would try and raise would now go to Colin's charity for the research into and the rehabilitation of those with spinal injuries.

Now that the trip is over, the money raised and only the memories left, I have been asked to write a little about our Trek! So here goes:

The days averaged 13 miles of walking; some of them being as long as 17 miles; others about 10. The terrain was designated as medium to hard-going, and we were rather overwhelmed to read that our ascents would equal climbing Mount Kilimanjaro – 19,494 feet!! But it was, as promised by the brochures and walking guides, varied and truly beautiful, consisting of high, rather bleak mountain tops as we crossed the Clewydian Range and the Black Mountains, to the best that Britain has to offer in the way of leafy lanes and green or golden fields, filled with either with sheep (of which there seemed to be an extraordinary number) or cattle (and a rather alarming number of bulls too!), or rustling, shimmering, ripening wheat. Hedgerows bursting with all varieties of wild flowers, hawthorns iced with blossoms of pristine whiteness, and the sound of joyful spring birdsong constantly filling the air.

Our plans have always on our walks, been to stroll and chat, carrying with us on our backs only our water supply, our picnic lunch, and a few other basics (not to mention a few extra plasters for blisters!). The hosts of each Bed and Breakfast where we spent the night transport our luggage to our next night's stop. These nightly stops provided the topic of conversation for the first hour of so each day! Normally, as with our stop at The Old Rectory in Llandegla we were amazed at the standard and hospitality. There we arrived slightly damp, as it had been drizzling for the final ten minutes of our walk, very worn out having walked 17 and a half miles, and were greeted by friendly faces, a HUGE and simply delicious tea which consisted of an ENORMOUS pot of tea with cups to match in size, scones made with sun-dried tomatoes, olives and other goodies, ordinary tea-time scones with copious amounts of jam and fresh cream, Ginger cake, Carrot cake with Cream Cheese topping and Pineapple cake! Having stuffed ourselves, there was no need to stagger along to the pub that night for a meal, we simply sank into steaming hot baths and blissfully comfortable beds!

The joy of walking for so many hours each day is that you get to bedtime feeling completely tired out, your limbs aching, your eyes heavy and your sleep is as a consequence, deep, dreamless and unbelievably refreshing.

As mentioned at the beginning, the weather in a place like Britain can snooker you! And how! But Val and I seem to have friends in high places, for without fail, each long walk we have attempted (so far) we have been blessed with lovely weather. On this two week trek we

were only plagued by a day of drizzle, as distinct from heavy rain, when we found it necessary to don what we have come to refer to as our "plastic over-hosen" i.e. water-proof (and distinctly unglamorous) pants together with other water proof gear, and we had one other day when it was damp, otherwise it was either cool and overcast, ideal walking weather, or sunny. Obviously to have the countryside bathed in sunlight is the ideal, but if the weather is changeable, this adds to the variation.

The scenery was without a word of exaggeration, stunning. Our third or fourth day (they tend to blur one into the other on these walks), we spent strolling along the Elysweg Crag, which are described in the guide as having Alpine scenery, and this was true. At the end of the Crag the valley opens out and in the middle, like some extraordinary Arthurian vision, is a perfectly natural round hill, topped with the remains of a magic castle. Part of the charm of walking in this border country is that the whole area from Prestatyn in the north to Chepstow in the south is littered with castles from the days of Offa down to the present, testament to the niggling and sometimes bloody fighting that has gone on between the Welsh and the English over the centuries. For anyone passionate about British history as I am, it adds fascinating dimensions to one's thoughts as you trudge along, knowing that your feet are following in the footsteps of so many famous characters and ancestors from the pages of history.

Two weeks in each others company was something both Val and I were slightly worried about! We would start each day chatting and walking together, then as time passed, I would tend to end up ahead (I have been elected navigator right from walk one, mainly as Val often and readily admits, if it was left to her we would end up in Outer Mongolia!), and each of us relapses into our own thoughts. It is companionable time, however, and I think I would find it difficult to find anyone else with whom I would rather walk. It was slightly different on this walk as various friends joined us for odd days, breaking the monotony of each other's company! We had Ann and Richard Griffiths from Monmouth to walk with on the Saturday and Sunday in the middle weekend, as well as on the last day when Ann's colleagues from the surgery in Monmouth also joined us. Another day, Dick Hughes and his younger son Robert helped to push us (almost literally!), up Hay Bluff and on to the top of the Black Mountains, a section I had been particularly worried about as we had been warned by other walkers that their day up there had been a nightmare of freezing, right angle rain, and the need to use a compass to regain direction! Dick however, also has friends in high places, and the weather was gorgeous!

Our final sprint up the slightly disappointing last section of the Path, brought us to an equally disappointing stone marked "beginning or end of Offa's Dyke Path" and somehow, after all those miles, 177 of the official Path, but several more to and from various B&Bs, it seemed rather an anti-climax - we meant to get ourselves a bottle of Offa's Dyke Sparkling Wine at a local vineyard the day before, but missed it! However, there was no denying the sense of achievement, not to mention the sense of fitness, and the elation at knowing that we had 'done it' all in one go!

Some people find out what they like to do best early in life, I have found my ideal holiday now at this late stage, and walking in Britain along ancient rights of way, past castles, through exquisite villages, down those magical lanes and through those pleasant fields, is without doubt, what I love best. We raised over one thousand pounds, and I, and I know Val also, spent many hours deep in thought for those for whom we were raising the money who are unable to enjoy such freedom and pleasure. I hope sincerely that our small contribution will go some way towards the research to make their lives easier, better and pleasanter.

Good luck Colin.