

Walking the Paths Ilay Cooper



As long as the body holds out, life is better without a car. Living alone, I rarely need more than I can carry. There is a tiny community of walkers in Purbeck, folk who use the paths for their local business, not just for weekend pleasure. At a distance, their silhouettes become familiar and they say I have a characteristic walk. Everyone manipulates Time and Travel. Some are prompt, some invariably late. The mode of movement is not the issue; it is a question of attitude to arrival, to punctuality. We walkers are slower, moulding time to accommodate the difference. For me, Swanage takes an hour, Corfe, Kingston and Ulwell around 40 minutes; The Square and Compass is 30 minutes away and Langton only 25. Knowing that, why should I be less than punctual?

Purbeck has always been home, so in passing through the seasonally-changing countryside I also survey my past. We were country kids of the forties and fifties, bathed in the wealth of post-war austerity. There was no television and radio had a limited appeal. That landscape was our playground; few corners lack a personal history. As kids, to get to places we walked or cycled. What else? Few families had cars and for years mine was not amongst them.

There are two sorts of walking; the first is functional, to a destination, the second, recreational, exploring, looking for flotsam or creatures. Both are interspersed with waking dreams. My best

friend lived in Langton, I in New Swanage. The direct route was hazardous, past a skeletal white oak guarding a three-point junction where, pierced by a stake, Tom Burnham's self-slain corpse lay beneath its triangular mound. Ghosts still patrolled it. Nearby, a Black Monk wandered through Godlingston Manor and the cemetery lay in orderly death beyond. After dark, I preferred the longer route. Stranger danger had yet to be invented to tarnish childhood; experience taught us that a rare few folk were best avoided, when to run like hell.

Unlike my peers, I continue to walk or cycle. In retrospect, the only loss was that I never had a passion-wagon. There were motorbikes, but I didn't make the next step in motorisation.

It is no good pretending that walking was a positive decision; it was a conspiracy of negatives I had no interest or aptitude for machines, no love of cars, no money to get one, and never took, let alone passed, my test. So functional walking persisted, persists.

As for recreational walking, geographical features often dictate the route. As children, our annual expedition, which my mother graced with the glorious rarity of a cold chicken, was along the chalk ridge from New Swanage to Corfe. It was crowned by the steam train home. Later, we traced streams to see what they yielded, seeking treasure raided an unofficial rubbish dump on the heath near Studland, followed the bird-nest thickets along the foot of the downs. There were the woods across the valley in springtime, climbing a greening oak to sit on a broad bough and see what happened. Things always happen.

The sea with its rocks, sand or mere mud forms an interesting margin to follow. After all, Purbeck is all but an island. Working at St Aldhelms Quarry, on fine days I could walk home 'along cliff', commuting through countryside others saved up to see. Now, I choose the cliff path diversion between Dunshay and Swanage, broken by familiar bird calls and outlines, by a swim in summer.

Swimming came early, distance not speed. Before we aspired to boats, it offered another aspect of that familiar coast, providing a frontal view of the cliffs, revealing breeding birds unseen from land, unsuspected caves, lurking rocks and winding weed measuring the tide. It served, too, to ford gaps of water. At Freshwater the tide cuts the beach between Kimmeridge and Chapmans Pool; only a few strokes to swim but a mile back and an increasingly precarious climb to avoid. A tiny stretch of sea separates rocky Gad Cliff shore from Pondfield Cove. I never climbed past it, but the swim was easy.

And the dreams? They form a vital, ever-present element in walking: one looks, one remembers and one dreams. So much woken dreaming. Sometimes, on a dull day over a dull track, the familiar landscape barely intrudes. Problems, plans, memories, fantasies, unfinished arguments

so brilliantly finished, flow unimpeded through the head, each new subject triggered by the slightest prompt. Like conversation: how did we get here?

Jed Corbett's Purbeck Archive 1976-2019