

## Test yourself

There's something about a New Year that fires up the imagination. You get mad ideas like losing weight or even walking the whole of the Test Way in the most appalling conditions possible. Yes if you ever feel like beating the January blues or discovering just how unfit you are after the obese obscenities of Christmas indulgence, I can recommend this walk, described as easy\* but in my case somewhat of a killer on the third and fourth day when hills were involved.

As I live in Romsey, I decided to do the walk from Eling wharf to Inkpen Beacon. This way I would only need accommodation for one night and with the help of my partner could be dropped off and picked up easily. According to Hampshire County Council, the Test Way is 44 miles long. This is at variance with [newforest-online.co.uk](http://newforest-online.co.uk) which puts the distance at 48 miles and the actual marker post at Inkpen Beacon Hill which states Eling Wharf is 49 miles!

The walk split out nicely into four days, Eling Wharf to Romsey, Romsey to Stockbridge, Stockbridge to St Mary Bourne and St Mary Bourne to Inkpen Beacon. So off I went on a very wet Friday morning from Eling Wharf. Tramping through Totton and onto the lower Test reserve was straightforward enough. The marshes themselves were reminiscent of a scene from *Great Expectations* with added atmosphere from the crackling of the pylons above and the glimpses of the huge dock cranes of Southampton in the mists. It was quiet but most of all it was slippery. The wooden slatted boards that cross the reserve have no wire mesh to allow grip, so consequently you immediately adopt a style based on walking on ice as there's no way you want to slip and end up in methane filled pools of churned mud of indeterminate depth.

The route takes you under the M271 motorway and through Nursling past the charming 14<sup>th</sup> century church of St Boniface – a good spot to take a breather, even though the sound of motorway traffic reminds you of its proximity. There were many times on this first leg that I thought I was going to be defeated because the footpath was completely flooded. I was in sight of Broadlands and the Romsey to Ower road when I spotted the underwater route in the final field. Luckily I did not have to wade through the water and finish with soaking feet as well as face, but instead circumnavigated to arrive at The Three Tuns for a welcome lunchtime drink.

Day 2 took me first to Mottisfont and then eventually, down a very boring ex railway line into Stockbridge. The challenge as in the first day was to arrive without wet feet as many fields and paths were boot suckers and the going was soft. Still it was a good chance to ruminate. I find the solitude and being outside, particularly in winter helps to generate some of my best ideas. It was so warm this day that I actually heard frequent thunderclaps, something I wasn't aware could happen in winter. I retired to The White Hart at Stockbridge for refreshment waiting for Maggie to pick me up. As she couldn't find me in the pub, she asked the barmaid whether she'd seen a pink-faced, muddy booted man anywhere and was directed to the smokers' shelter outside where I was cooling off.

So far, so good. I had already walked these two sections before, but the big test came on day 3 when the distance was an estimated thirteen and a half miles to my overnight stop in St Mary Bourne.

Sunday started out along a continuation of the same disused railway line up to the Mayfly pub. There I carried straight on and past the bizarre sight of an old railway platform – presumably Fullerton or possibly Cottonworth festooned with greenery. When I hit the main Andover road I realised that I had gone the wrong way and cursed the lack of signage. Crossing the A303 I also cursed my map, which although only a few years old was already out of date and added another mile to my journey as the original route alongside the river had been rerouted. I sought solace at Middleton church and rested for five minutes. Time was getting on and I still had a way to go before dusk. At ten to four I arrived at The Coronation Arms in St Mary Bourne. God knows what the locals must have thought when the exhausted sweating colossus opened the door and walked in.

Sunday night is Bingo night at the pub. It was a chance for me to sit quietly at the bar to think, drink and write whilst the silence was regularly punctuated by slightly excited calls of house or Bingo or whatever it is a player says when they've won. Sue and Len were excellent hosts and I can honestly say I slept like a log that night.

Fortified by a full English the next day I strode out on my final eleven mile leg to Inkpen. I was amused to see a sign that suggested that worrying was an offence and not so amused to be "ring fenced" by electric wire at Hurstbourne Tarrant. It was blatantly blocking the path. Somewhere between Upton and Linkenholt I finally succumbed to my fate and became Mudslime Slim after losing my footing on a particularly slippery patch of hoof churned bridleway. The first person

who saw me that day was going to have a good laugh, just as I did after I attempted to remove the mud from my face and hands using the abundant muddy pools that littered the route.

I was not dismayed. I felt fitter and knew more about myself and the Test Valley than I would have ever imagined at the start of the walk.

The final push was steep and as usual difficult to grip, but the view at the end was magnificent. Even the sun showed its face briefly and I felt wet but invigorated as I linked up with Maggie who was on hand to record my unorthodox appearance for posterity.

*Steve Bratt © January 2008*