

It's not how you start; it's how you finish.

In 1973 I was one of a team of publishing designers working in London on a large book of country walks. The book included a section on long distance footpaths, or trails as they are now called. The Pennine Way had been fully opened in 1965 but I only found out about it through working on the book. My imagination was captured and I planned to take three weeks holiday that September to walk the 270 miles from Edale in Derbyshire to Kirk Yetholm just in Scotland. I was 25 but not particularly fit.

I was determined to be free to camp when I wanted to and not have to descend off the path to find accommodation. So I bought a one-man tent, sleeping bag, backpack, boots and clothing, compass, stove, pans, and of course Ordnance Survey maps. I planned my walk carefully, noting where streams were for water, the location of shops and pubs when the path descended into villages, and features of the landscape to look out for. I had no experience of long walks and no real understanding of the challenges and risks of walking alone on the moors.

I got off the train at Edale and stopped at the Old Nag's Head for a sandwich and a pint of beer. Then I turned right out of the door and set off up the Pennine Way. I had already made three errors:

1. I had done little walking to build up my fitness.
2. I had not broken in my boots.
3. My backpack was far too heavy, partly because I intended to make a comprehensive collection of slides of the entire route and had packed copious rolls of film. When I swung my pack onto my shoulders it practically knocked me off my feet.

Since then the route has changed in places to reduce human erosion but in 1973 the path climbed by the side of a brook and onto Kinder Scout. It was a warm and sunny day and the stony ascent soon tired me. When I had committed to this expedition I had no idea what it would take to complete it. If following the stream up from the pub was testing, at least I had the security of knowing my route. When the path spilled out onto the featureless peaty plateau on Kinder Scout the route-finding challenge began. The flat summit was criss-crossed by endless ditches known as groughs and they all seemed to run across my path. For some distance I was doing step-downs and step-ups like some sort of outdoor gym activity but with a 50lb pack on my back. Great for my knees! Without a clear view of the way ahead, I discovered my fourth mistake:

4. I hadn't practised using my compass to establish confidence in my navigation skills.

I ploughed on in what I thought was NNW, hoping to reach the rocky top of Kinder Downfall. A hundred metres ahead of me a walker appeared from my left heading in a more easterly direction than mine. I thought, "He must know where he is going." And I made my fifth error:

5. I followed the man without knowing where he was going, assuming he was on the Pennine Way.

It was only when he veered southwards that I realised he wasn't walking towards Kinder Downfall so I turned westwards, if my compass reading was correct.. On a wobbly course constantly adjusted a bit left or a bit right, I traversed this assault

course of groughs. The good news was that the late summer had been dry so there was very little water in the bottoms. Just mud. The bad news was that there was very little water in the bottoms so there was no direction of flow to help my navigating.

Eventually, to my intense relief, I came to the western rim of Kinder Scout, with slightly hazy but beautiful views. Within half a mile I reached Kinder Downfall, famous for its dramatic waterfall. The bad news was that there was very little water. But my disappointment was mitigated by the fact that I was no longer lost, the fear had gone, I was still alive and both knees were still working. The Pennine Way no longer crosses Kinder Scout but takes a more westerly route well below the summit. I followed the edge of the plateau northwards to its north-west corner and descended across moorland to the A57.

After the empty and remote landscape it felt surreal to have to wait for a series of trucks to pass. I crossed below Snake Pass at Doctor's Culvert and entered boggy grassland. Mist started to descend and it was time to stop. When the ground rose I pitched my tent for the first time. The mist became fog and the light was fading. I had read a story of the ghosts of Roman soldiers patrolling the pass, so camping on my own for the first time felt decidedly spooky. Officially I had knocked about eight miles off the length of the trail but my wanderings had added to my first stage and I slept.

In the morning the fog was thick. I faced having to cross Bleaklow Hill, another peaty plateau but, according to the map, a series of streams radiated from the summit like bicycle spokes. I hoped this would aid my navigation. I fried bacon and eggs and made myself a coffee, hoping the fog would thin. From my camp I could see the faint line of a pole marking the way, but nothing beyond. In the clinging damp I packed my wet tent and felt my way forward. Further poles took ages to appear and each one was like a dear friend arriving late for a meeting. The lack of recent rain meant the headwaters of the streams were little different from the groughs on Kinder and my progress was slow. I must have missed a couple of posts where the line turned west because I eventually stopped on the top of a rocky outcrop that shouldn't have been there. Whilst I searched the map, the fog thinned sufficiently below my feet to reveal a reservoir in Longdendale. I was above a line of crags called Lawrence Edge and as the fog lifted I could identify Crowden on the far side of the dale and then the line of the Pennine Way ascending Crowden Great Brook. I was too far east, so I worked my way above the crag and descended down a clough to the valley.

It was my last experience of fog on the whole walk. Remarkably, all the remaining days were sunny. Every day the sun shone from behind me, turning the slopes of dry grasses a glorious gold against steely grey skies to the north. It never rained in nineteen days. Every day was warm; so warm that I walked in tee shirts and wished I had a pair of shorts; so warm that I washed clothes in brooks and pinned them to my backpack to dry. My walk was a joy. I soon forgot the failures and frights at the southern end and even the state of my feet couldn't deny me the pleasure of walking. Several toes on each foot were like peeled raw shrimps, almost luminous pink, and blisters on each heel bled for days. I only had two choices: stop and catch a bus to the nearest station or continue through the pain barrier. Each morning I set off in considerable pain, developing a sort of rolling hobble on the outside of my feet until

numbness took over and I was fine. Somewhere along the route I noticed that my feet had hardened and I could walk normally.

The landscape became more and more beautiful. The light was stunning. I rarely met anyone except near car parks accessing popular locations or when the path came into a village. Then it was a bonus to stop for gammon and eggs and a pint of local ale. Actually, there was one further encounter with fog but it was rather special. I was climbing Fountains Fell when the sun was suddenly obliterated. Near the summit I entered a thick blanket of low cloud. Ahead of me were shadowy shapes of several tall cairns like big people. I advanced cautiously and beyond the final cairn I sat down and waited. I'm glad I did. Suddenly, like a curtain being lifted on stage, a band of bright green appeared below me. Between me and the sunny valley was a steep slope. As I took a photograph the cloud lifted further to reveal the lower slopes of Pen-y-Ghent, sandwiched between the green grass and the clouds as if suspended in the air. Within a few minutes all the cloud had gone and the distinctive shape of Pen-y-Ghent lay revealed. My next climb.

Perhaps the most magical experiences were when I woke to the dawn sunshine and watched dew sparkle. The clearest memories of this magic, so clear even after 45 years, were on Black Hill and near Chew Green. After descending the gentle slopes of Black Hill early on my walk, I pitched my tent on a narrow strip of perfect green grass in a tiny comb. Behind me a low bank screened me from the path; in front a small noisy stream flowed, bubbling over a boulder. I went to sleep with the constant rushing filling the tent, yet in the morning I had grown so used to the sound it was like silence. The air was still, the grass was wet, the sun rose over the bank and sent long shadows of the blades of grass between beads of dew. I was reluctant to leave to cross Wessenden Head Moor but even in those days I was not entirely certain about the legality of wild camping and most mornings I had set off by 7 am before anyone was about.

The other occasion was near Chew Green Roman Camp on the Cheviots, close to the Scottish border but overlooking the stunningly beautiful Coquetdale. My tent faced south-east and the early slanting sun shone. Ahead lay my final day's walk but I remember lying on my stomach at grass level just watching the dewdrops move delicately in the breeze. Over the previous 18 days I had got fitter, so much fitter that I went on to complete the final 20 mile stretch to Kirk Yetholm by 5pm. I had a celebratory drink in the pub, feeling rather lonely and out of place, and then caught the bus to the railway station at Berwick upon Tweed. Standing on the platform with others waiting to travel south was an odd experience. Despite my naive lack of preparation I had walked 270 miles and seen the most amazing landscapes. Yet, as I have found again in recent years, the sense of achievement was pushed down by a sad feeling of anticlimax. I was going back to my desk.

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