

## “CXXVIII milia ambulare in calceis”

(Title adapted from the song by Joe South, covered by Elvis Presley and Bryan Ferry)

“Grandpa.”

“Can you give me an example of an anagram?”

“Yes Daisy, I can.”

“Had rain and Hadrian is an anagram.”

“How do you know all these things Grandpa?”

“Because I am old, and therefore wise. And last week Granny and I walked the Hadrian’s wall path, and we had rain., And wind., And mud.”



The official 84-mile Hadrian’s Wall Path was opened in 2012 and it is estimated that 11,000 people walk the route annually. For me, it became a picaresque version of the American road movie. We left home and walked to the bus stop, took train and metro to the start in Tynemouth, and then had 10 days walking to Bowness on Solway, before travelling back by train and bus. We went with a company that booked the accommodation and transported our cases between B&B’s and arranged taxis if the end of the walk was not near that night’s stop (more of this later...). By the time you add in detours to look at things, and to walk from the route to the night stop and evening meal, and the fact that I don’t walk in a straight line, our total mileage was 128 miles, 789 flights of stairs and 284,468 steps (official fitbit stats). Along the way we met interesting people, talked of many things, had adventures, were kidnapped by the wrong taxi firm, saw the famous Sycamore Gap tree the day before a barbarian cut it down and ate a lot of big breakfasts.

The advice is to walk west to east so the prevailing wind is behind you, but that would put the wall and the crag edge on the higher ground on my blind side, so we walked east to west, with the wind in our faces, but the vertiginous drop to my right where I could see it.

The wall was started in AD122, took 6 years and 15,000 men to build it, and served as a formal northern boundary for the Roman Empire and to keep the barbarian Scots at bay. One can but marvel at the logistical



exercise it must have been, and it stands as a testament to the command and control and communication networks of the Roman Empire. We visited a number of museums, took pictures of a lot of stones, were invited to closely inspect the latrines that served 800 men, witness at the surgical instrument they used to undertake basic cataract surgery, compare their footwear to ours, and approve the auxiliary soldier pension plan. If they survived 25 years, they got a pension, Roman citizenship for them and their dependents and a plot of land. If they survived 25 years... I have a mental image of some poor auxiliary from sunny Spain. Join the auxiliary force son. See the world. A job with prospects. And then you end up guarding the northern most border,



in the wind, the rain, the mud and the cold, fighting off wild barbarians you can't understand. "Why me Sarge, why me?" "Because you're here laddie". Speaking of barbarian's, we were one of the last to see the Sycamore Gap tree, as we were there on the Tuesday before it was cut down on the Wednesday. Thereafter, everybody we met and talked to had that as their first topic of conversation.

We stayed in some interesting B&Bs. In one, our en suite bathroom was bigger than our lounge at home. In another, the Norwegian host had pictures of her Grandfather? in military uniform looking like a Prussian soldier with a spike on top of his helmet. She was most solicitous of my sight loss, as she has a blind gentlemen stay with her 2 or 3 times a year. She cuts up his breakfast, laying it out the same way each day, with cocktail sticks in each bit of bacon and sausage. Would I like her to do the same for me? No thanks Tove, I can manage. We had particular and individual detailed touches like a tissue box in the bedroom of our first B&B which was placed in a wooden box decorated with sea shells and little fishing nets. Many of the houses were old with high ceilings and original coving; one as old as 1783. Wonderful to look at as long as you don't have to heat it. Another was in an old repeater station in the middle of nowhere – left over from the days when telephone signals lost voltage, and had to go through a repeater station that boosted the signal



to get it up the line. The host was a tad forgetful – what did I cook for you last night? What did you want in your sandwiches? He also had a 1981 Ferrari 308 GTS in iconic Ferrari red (what else). 42 years old,

100,000 miles on the clock, 3 lever arch files of service history, photographs and documentation, and on the market. A snip at £55k, and probably an investment opportunity.

We had some interesting conversations with fellow walkers apart from variants on “did you see the tree before it was cut down?”. Pause for a grumpy old man and his irritation with the poor English skills of tabloid journalists. “The tree was chopped down with a chain saw” NO! You chop with an axe, you cut with a chain saw. If you chop with a chain saw you will be there till Christmas and probably lose an arm in the process.

The most interesting conversations were those with Americans, as we stood in the shadow of Hadrian’s wall discussing lessons from history and Trump’s wall. The Department of Homeland Security’s internal estimate in early 2017, shortly after Trump took office, was that his proposed border wall would cost \$21.6 billion. Rather different from the Roman project plan I think.

There wasn’t one bit of the walk that did not have some interest. Our start through Newcastle had the different historical perspective of the derelict Swan Hunter shipyard, and the later gentrification of the waterfront. The last stretch along the Solway had wetland marshes and sea birds. It’s the only walk I have been on where you are advised to check the tide tables before you start out. And tremble ye as you pass the sign saying “If there is water here, the road ahead is 3’ underwater”.

*“Did you enjoy it Grandpa??” “Yes we did Daisy.”*

We have been away with Ramblers and Exodus, but not done anything quite like this, particularly since my brain haemorrhage. We took 10 walking days, whilst young fit lads were doing it in 4. However, doing it quicker would not leave time to visit museums, or stand, stare and reflect. There is no such thing as bad weather, simply the wrong clothing. We took the right clothing, and the washing machine is on. My afternoon job is to pressure wash the boots. What is not to like about that?

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