

# *The pleasures of walking*

Walking is one of the most basic of human activities. The majority of us *can* walk, but the way in which each person enjoys the pastime varies greatly. Some like the companionship of walking with a club or with friends; others prefer to walk alone. Walkers have no rules or regulations to follow other than to observe the laws of the countryside and to act sensibly and safely.

Many people delight in beautiful scenery and one of the best way to enjoy and experience the countryside is to explore it on foot. Those who see the countryside from a car miss so much because roads, unlike paths, rarely follow the most scenic route. Most books about walking concentrate on hill-walking and there is no doubt that mountain scenery is exciting and dramatic, but even hardened hill-walkers will find that there is much beauty and enjoyment to be found in lowland countryside.

Walking combines well with other interests. The naturalist has to walk quietly through the landscape to avoid disturbing wildlife, and even casual walkers are likely to see things they will remember for a long time. Some of my special memories are watching buzzards soaring effortlessly over the Cheviots; seeing a vixen carrying a rabbit back to her cubs; almost stepping on a fox in a ditch early in the morning; and watching three young weasels playing tag round an oak tree. One walk in Yorkshire was made memorable by a botanist friend showing me tiny Alpine flowers growing in the grikes of the limestone pavements.

The landscape itself is a fascinating study. Although the shape of the mountains, hills, streams and valleys predates the arrival of humans, yet it is we who have largely created the landscape of the British Isles by felling the primeval forest, draining the land and enclosing the fields with a complicated pattern of hedges, walls and ditches. In the course of moulding the landscape, our ancestors built towns and villages. Discovering the reasons for siting settlements in particular places makes an interesting detective puzzle for the inquisitive to unravel. The walker has time to admire the natural taste and eye for beauty shown by our forebears in building even the humblest dwellings. You cannot walk through Swaledale and fail to remark on the number of elegant stone barns to be seen in the fields. Evidence of change, decay and renewal are everywhere for the interested walker to discover and interpret.

It can be so rewarding to recognize traces of the past. A piece of rough ground fenced off from a fertile pasture turns out to be remains of a motte and bailey castle built by the Normans; a circular barn on a slight bluff is all that is left of an old windmill; that remarkably broad path with a pronounced crown and with ditches on both sides is obviously an old road which investigation may reveal as prehistoric, Roman,

## *The pleasures of walking*

---

or a drove road. It is fascinating to follow some of the abandoned roads and tracks depicted on Ordnance Survey maps of England and Wales as 'restricted byways'. Those interested in antiquities marked on maps will find that accurate use of a satnav or compass is invaluable in pinpointing the location of sites.

There is now a great deal of interest in industrial archaeology and the walker can often observe traces of past industry. The Pennines and Dartmoor are particularly rich in old mine-workings where lead, tin, copper and silver and other metals and minerals were extracted. Because the workings are often some distance from the nearest settlement, they have frequently remained remarkably intact, and it is possible to come across mine shafts, levels, engine sheds, and bits of rusting machinery. The Industrial Revolution started in the valleys of England and some of these early factories still exist as fine buildings in lovely settings. Disused canals, railways and tramways can be found in many parts of the British Isles and are well worth exploring.

Investigating places associated with writers and their work, such as the Hardy country in Dorset or, as he called it, Wessex, and the Brontë country near Keighley in West Yorkshire, can add an extra dimension to walking. Top Withens, the ruined house generally believed to be the inspiration for *Wuthering Heights* in Emily Brontë's eponymous novel, lies on the Pennine Way. Arthur Ransome set many of his books for children in the Lake District, and at Beatrix Potter's home at Far Sawrey near Windermere you can see the vegetable garden where Mr McGregor chased Peter Rabbit, and the chimney that Tom Kitten explored.

Walking is generally regarded as a non-competitive pastime, but for those who enjoy a challenge there are many opportunities and events in which they can test themselves (see Chapter 21). Walking is an excellent way of keeping fit and unlike most sports, can be continued until late into life. There are many seventy year-olds who regularly go into the mountains and can surprise younger, less experienced walkers with their strength and stamina, and it seems that there is some evidence to suggest that walking stimulates mental alertness especially in older people.

Some of our place names are so musical, exciting, even comical, that they positively invite investigation. Who can resist the delights of Brown Willy, Downhayne Brake, High Cup Nick, Dollywaggon Pike, Glaramara, Pike o' Stickle, Ringing Roger, Thunacar Knott, Wayland's Smithy, Black Sail Pass, Wildboardclough, Toller Porcorum, Nether Wallop and Steeple Bumpstead? The predominately Celtic place names of Wales, Scotland and Ireland are equally fascinating and euphonious. A dictionary of place names is a useful addition to the library of the well-informed walker.

In a predominantly urban world, walking is one of the best ways to connect to our heritage.

