

Walking the Norfolk Coastal Path

May 20th-24th, 2013



At first we thought we would also walk the Peddars Way, the arrow-straight Roman Road which leads northwest to connect with the Norfolk Coastal Path. But our research suggested it's a pretty boring walk, largely on minor roads and without handy overnight accommodation. The last straw was when we discovered that there is no tunnel or overpass bridging the notoriously busy A11 highway. We would have to scamper across with our packs on our backs! So we chose to walk only the coastal path, a 50-mile route heading due East from Hunstanton to Cromer. Near the end of a dismal spring, we hoped the last week of May would offer brighter weather.

Hunstanton – Brancaster Staithe – 11 miles

When we closed the door behind us on Monday the forecast called for heavy rain all over Britain for the entire week, apart from a narrow strip along the East Anglian coast – which is where we were headed. So our first day started auspiciously. It was breezy and sunny and the gods of serendipity were on form, too: while our train waited at Littleport on the way to Kings Lynn for a London-bound train to pass, we spied an old friend on the platform, Gerard, whom we hadn't seen in some years. His two grown-up children were with him, and though we couldn't converse across the tracks through the narrow open slot of the upper window, we were able to wave and shout hello.

We set out from the central green of Hunstanton, a renowned Victorian watering place, which was still attracting a Bank Holiday crowd to its cliffside park. We left the holidaymakers behind at the ruins of St Edmund's Chapel and the old defunct lighthouse, where a sharp easterly wind rose in our faces. From the cliffs a great expanse of sky opened over the seascape of the Wash.



The path descended to the shore and we followed a stream wandering between the holes of a golf-course to the hamlet of Holme-next-the-Sea. A long boardwalk set over the muddy littoral led past pools and sea lavender. Serpentine rivulets wandered through mudbanks rising above the retreating tide. The windswept shore became increasingly isolated as the sandy headland of Gore Point grew larger on the horizon. There we turned south on a lane following a creek to the brick and flint houses of the village of Thornham.

The preferred local pub here, The Lifeboat, has been taken over by the noted restaurateur Marco Pierre White. The glitzy restaurant, gleaming with elaborate table settings, was deserted, but on the outdoor terrace we enjoyed Marco's inspired take on traditional pub sandwiches. Chuck was so fagged that Judith undertook to order at the bar. Selecting a beer from the pump, she sought the advice of a rheumy-eyed old geezer, perhaps the last of the old regulars, who properly considered the question by asking whom the beer was for. 'The Abbot's too strong for him', he said, 'if you're walking. He'll go to sleep.' So she ordered a pint of Wherry, a satisfying local brew with a lower alcohol content.



Chuck nevertheless continued to wilt on the afternoon leg, which detoured inland up a long sloping hill to cross a couple of miles of lonely farm fields. Finally, the route turned back towards the sea, taking us down a country lane to the village of Brancaster. From here a boardwalk traversed a final mile of salt marshes along the seaward edge of the village. Several houses had lovely gardens opening right on to the boardwalk, and there were a few welcome benches.

Chuck was flagging fast; it had become clear that he had chosen the wrong boots for this journey and his feet were lacerated. We were relieved to arrive at a comfortable B&B in a modern house. Fortunately, it was only a short hobble down to the Jolly Sailors public house for fish and chips and another pint of Wherry.

Brancaster Staithe – Wells-next-the-Sea. 11 miles



The weather was gloomy and the cold wind unrelenting, but it did not actually rain today. Our 1985 guidebook said the path starts between two old fishermen's shacks, and lo! – they were still there. The route ran on top of grassy embankments to a wide, sandy bay and then carried on along the sea bank on the breezy division between creek and marsh. Low trees encroached as we passed along the edge of grazing meadows. The old guide book said we might hear a cuckoo and yes, they were

still there, along with the wheeling gulls and terns, and the occasional heron, egret and swan.

Burnham Overy Staithe came into view and stayed on our horizon for some time, as the route swung south before crossing a field to gain the village and the public house, The Hero. He, of course, was Lord Nelson who was born at nearby Burnham Thorpe. The classy paint manufacturers, Farrow and Ball have staked out this territory. Like most of the pubs and the doors of many of the houses, The Hero was painted in subtle shades reflecting the muted tones of the sea and sky. It was fair enough to sit outside with our cod's roe on toast and crayfish sandwich, but the wind got up and we had to retreat inside and warm up with coffee.

The afternoon trail took us back onto the sea bank, a long walk along the saltings to Gun Hill, where the dunes suddenly loomed large. There was an undulating climb over the top and down onto the beach. We crunched along a tidemark of tens of thousands of razor clamshells which gave better purchase to our boots than the soft sand.



The shoreline curved into the huge, sandy bay of Holkham, where families huddled behind brightly hopeful canvas windbreaks, resolutely shivering in their shorts and bathing costumes with jerseys worn on top, in that test of human endurance called a typical British seaside holiday. We found shelter from the wind when the path strayed behind pine trees to follow the shoreline. A boating lake came into view, and then an immense caravan site served by a narrow gauge railway running out from Wells-Next-

the-Sea. We marched the last mile down the straight gravelled embankment bending into the teeth of a howling gale.

Wells is a typical British seaside resort, full of noisy arcades and smelly snack food shops. In the centre of the village we found the Corner House where a key had been left out for us. We mounted the crooked staircase into a cramped room where tomorrow's breakfast had been placed in a small frig. In a folder were a few sheets of local information typed by the landlord which grumbled about all of the restaurants and public houses except a fish and chippie. We didn't want to stand in the windswept street to eat our meal, so we ignored the warnings and went to the Wells Crab House Café. When we arrived at eight p.m. we were told that they closed at nine. Not 'last orders' - we would be tossed out. We sat down and then were ignored for a quarter of an hour, but eventually procured a decent seafood meal before throwing-out time. Afterwards, the streets of Wells were dim and deserted. Judith treated herself to a slice of cake and Chuck enjoyed another fine Wherry in the cosy bar beneath our room. We never saw the owner of our accommodation, but just left our payment in an envelope.



Wells-next-the-Sea – Cley-next-the-Sea. 11 miles

The squall swept in just as we left the seedy shorefront of Wells behind and started out on the embankment trail. We pulled on our full rain gear – ponchos and hoods and over-trousers – and kept it on for most of the morning.

Eventually we reached the beach, where the tide was high and the going was heavy and we were glad when the path wandered a bit inland. When the rain subsided it remained damp, misty and windy. We heard bird cries but could not always see them.

We met a man on the path coming from Cromer and he told us that the path beyond Morston, at the seven-mile mark, was blocked because of seafront reconstruction. ‘Not just a man and a wheelbarrow,’ he said, ‘but heavy construction equipment.’ And so it proved. After stopping at the Anchor pub in Morston for a late lunch we found the route barred by a fence and mechanical diggers

working behind it. There had been no notice of this posted anywhere along the way. The route took two loops beyond this point, to Blakeney and to Cley-next-the-Sea, and we weren’t sure whether the second loop was blocked as well.

With his tortured feet, Chuck was not displeased by this turn of events and we waited for the local hopper bus into Cley-next-the-Sea. Later we learned from the Norfolk Coastal Path website that only the Blakeney section of the path was blocked. But as they also claimed that plentiful notices were posted, we’re not sure whether to believe them. Any road, Cley-next-the-Sea is a delightful little outpost on the misty sea marshes, complete with an impressive windmill, and we were ready to enjoy the comforts of The George Hotel, where we had a room with a view of the foggy marshes, good beer and excellent fish dinners.

Cley-next-the-Sea – Cromer 13.5 miles

The next morning Chuck hung his boots onto his pack and walked in his Teva sandals, hoping it would not rain. It didn’t, and for the first time he began to really enjoy his surroundings. Unfortunately we were walking through ground-hugging cloud and very little was visible. A raised grassy bank led across the marshes and out onto the shingle beach.





It is possible to walk in sandals on shingle, Chuck discovered, if you plant and lift your feet carefully – rollicking like Frankenstein’s monster. Fortunately the shingle along this long stretch alternated with firm paths along the tops of the dunes. A series of little hillocks is dignified with names: Cley Eye, Little Eye, Flat Eye and finally the soaring heights of Gramborough Hill, reaching thirty meters, but difficult enough in the slipping sand. We spotted avocets, terns and swifts and, across a mere, two tall shapes with buff fronts standing motionless like penguins. They were probably herons, but even with binoculars we could not be sure.

We attained the cliffs on Water Hill and sheltered from the wind beneath a hedge to lunch on the bacon and sausage sandwiches we had contrived from breakfast left-overs. Then we marched alongside a golf course until we reached a headland where a little white coastal observation station perched overlooking the sea. Thick mist swirled around it and the volunteer who manned it admitted his watch seemed rather pointless. We could just make out the village of Sheringham, and made our way down to its promenade. From here the path diverts inland and climbs a hill offering good views before arriving at Cromer, three miles away. We would see nothing today and we were cold and footsore, so we found the train station instead.

Cromer is a classic Victorian seaside resort. We stayed at the Sandcliffs Hotel, a large block with the smell of damp in the faded public rooms and the whiff of cabbage in the spartan breakfast room. A friend, Roberta, drove us back to Sheringham for a meal in a welcoming French bistro, and afterwards we visited the Hotel de Paris in Cromer, an extravagant confection built in the 1890s. In the dismal dining room a one-man band was crooning 1950s pop songs on a stage while an elderly couple fox-trotted and another pair watched. The hotel looms just above an impressive

Victorian pier with a theatre at the end which was featuring a rock-and-roll performance.



When we returned to this viewpoint the next morning we could not see the end of the pier in the misty sea-fret which enveloped the shore. It was bitterly cold – nine degrees by the thermometer but aggravated by the chilly wind. The sun will be shining a few miles inland the locals told us, and so it was. We reached Norwich by bus and basked on the terrace of the ancient Adam and Eve pub near the cathedral, over a blissful final pint or two of Wherry. On the train back to London the newspaper told us that this was the conclusion of the coldest spring in fifty years, and the fourth most inhospitable ever recorded.

