

## The South Downs Way: an epic of endurance!



The South Downs Way wanders a hundred miles along the south coast of England from Eastbourne westward to Winchester. It's an easy walk because it runs mostly along the top of the downs. We would do it in four sections, each time travelling by train down from London to the starting point. We reckoned we could complete the whole journey in a few weeks. But there was the British weather to contend with. So it took us four months!

**Stage One:**  
**By train to Eastbourne**  
**Walking Eastbourne to Housedean Farm - 24 miles**  
**Return by bus and train via Lewes**



**Day one: 19<sup>th</sup> April 2012**  
**Eastbourne to Alfriston – 10 miles**

Our researches led us to believe that the hike out of Eastbourne was second only to the South Col. It isn't. You climb only a couple of hundred metres. A weak sun lighted our ascent, and then disappeared. We marched bending into a strong headwind, with occasional smatterings of rain. It was cold enough to wear gloves.



At Beachy Head, a magnet for the suicidal, the Samaritans maintain a notice board with an emergency phone number. A series of chalk slopes they call the Seven Sisters rolls on to Birling Gap. Our legs counted eight, or perhaps seven plus a half-sister. Fortified by hot soup at a café at the Birling Gap, we turned inland and followed the Cuckmere estuary upstream. Chuck was doubtful about how far he could walk these days. It appears that his maximum distance with a daypack on good ground with some moderate ups and downs is about ten miles. By the time we reached the



charming upriver village of Alfriston he was, in the colourful American vernacular, “draggin’ ass”. Alfriston is a self-consciously attractive village. The Star where we had a room has an attractive frontage but it is clearly is after the wedding market rather than hikers, so we crossed to the George opposite for an excellent meal.

**Day two: 20<sup>th</sup> April 2012**  
**Alfriston to Rodmell – 8 miles**

We walked through the same bracing weather the next day, though a bit less blowy further inland, with good views over the weald from the escarpment. Rape was in bloom in the fields, lambs skipped about, larks sung and orchids, cowslips and harebells bobbed in the short grass.



We crossed the river Ouse at Southease, where Virginia Woolf walked into the water. The church here is one of four in the Ouse valley with a round tower.

It was only eight miles, but by the time we reached Rodmell Chuck felt almost as knackered as yesterday. So, maybe that’s the new maximum? But we arrived early enough to visit Virginia Woolf’s weekend hideaway, the Monk’s House.





On a bright April afternoon the sprawling garden with its magnolias and masses of waving tulips was enchanting. We learned that in the 1960s Leonard Woolf had sold the house and two village cottages bought for the servants to the new Sussex University, for £24,000. The university sold the cottages for £23,000 and decided that the house would be an irresistible accommodation for visiting American professors of Eng Lit. They would delight in living in Virginia Woolf's house, sitting in her chair, sleeping in her bed, surrounded by her possessions. Wrong. They did not delight in her lack of a fridge, washing machine and central heating, So the university donated the house to the National Trust.



We stayed above a renovated barn in Rodmell and enjoyed fish and chips at the Abergavenny Arms.



**Day three: 21<sup>st</sup> April 2012**  
**Rodmell to Housedean Farm – 6 miles**  
**Return to London by bus and train via Lewes**

Another cold, bright, windy day brought views of Lewes, glimpses of the sea, tumuli and dew ponds.



Can one get lost on the South Downs Way?



The South Downs as we rarely saw it.



Field of early rape.



A proposal.



Harvey Tours Guide.



End of Stage One, a shorter, blowy and invigorating walk, but Chuck still felt weary. Is six miles the new max?



**Stage Two:**  
**By train to Lewes and bus to Housedean Farm**  
**Walking Housedean Farm to Washington - 23 miles**  
**Return by bus and train via Pulborough**



**Day four: 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2012**  
**Housedean Farm to Pycombe – 8.5 miles**

A climb up to the steep north edge of the Downs, over Ditchling Beacon to the little village of Pycombe. Unfortunately the views for which this section of the Downs is famed were denied us – although it wasn't raining that much, leaden grey cloud obscured all but landmarks as close as the Jack and Jill windmills.



Our B&B in Pycombe was in the house of an elderly couple who had worried their family but pleased themselves and their guests by extending their house to offer a comfortable en suite room. Pycombe is famed for making shepherds' crooks and though the forge is now a private house, a crook still latches the church gate. In 1603 Pycombe was hit by the plague and the village was moved down the hill, where The Plough public house still remains by the

road, though the rest of the village moved back centuries ago.

**Day five: 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2012**

**Pycombe to Upper Beeding – 7.5 miles**

As soon as we stepped out of our lodgings we realized the rain was heavier than it had appeared, so we went back inside and put on our heavy-duty rain gear: anorak, poncho and overtrousers. A steep climb up and then down into a deep dip to Saddlescombe. It used to be an important farmstead, owned by the Knights Templar, but now the forge is under the care of the National Trust. We tagged onto a group and learned about the mill and the forge. The guide produced a 7-foot pole. What was it? A haystack needle, used to test the health of a rick. The needle was poked deep into a rick and if its metal tip came up hot the hay in the centre must be starting to rot, and might even combust. Some needles had hooks and a sample of hay would be withdrawn for examination. The guide suggested that looking for this sort of needle in a haystack was much less unreasonable than looking for a sewing needle, and so may have been the source of the saying.

Saddlescombe boasted a tea stall in a yard. Tables in the open barn were being laid with flowers for lunch. After a welcome warm-up with tea and cake it was another climb to the rim of Devil's Dyke, an impressive dry valley. We had a chilly lunch peering into the murk to see if we could see the sea. Not sure. But we could identify Lancing College chapel standing out against the grey. Then we dropped down to the Adur valley to Upper Beeding, where we stayed in a substantial B&B set up and run by an enterprising couple after they returned from a year on a motorbike in Australia. The powerful bike was in the driveway. Dinner in the Kings Head down the road.

**Day six: 4<sup>th</sup> May 2012**

**Upper Beeding to Washington – 7 miles**

**Return by bus and train via Pulborough**

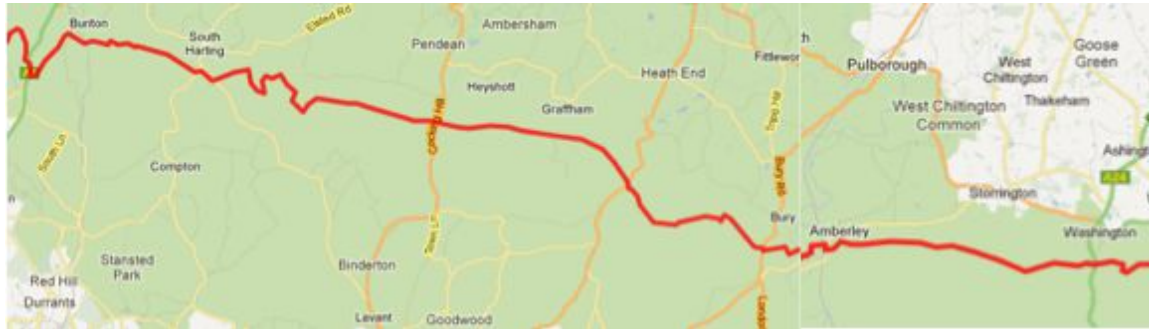
We set off down the banks of the Adur and made a detour to visit the Saxon church of St Botolph's. The River Adur was once navigable up to here, but there is now nothing except the church, with its old wall paintings, and a few big houses surrounded by trees.

Up on the Downs it was sunless, chilly and damp. We passed memorials to a farmer and his wife, and apparently also to their two sons both of whom died young. We plodded on to Chanctonbury Ring, a highlight of the Downs. In 1760 Charles Goring planted a ring of trees here on the top of an Iron Age fort. Many of the trees blew down in the 1987 gales, but it is still impressive. However on this cold wet day in spring 2012 we lingered only long enough to refuel from our trail rations, and set off quickly before seizing up with cold.

We had to explore a housing estate in Washington to find our B&B, which had no house number, but fortunately we had downloaded a photo and eventually identified it. Our hostess was out, but she had told us where to find the key so we let ourselves in and warmed up with tea and a bath and then looked at the forecast for the next day. Cold, rain, no sun. Over a meal at the Frankland Arms we decided to drop out and caught the bus to the rail station at Pulborough the next morning.



**Stage Three:**  
**By train to Pulborough and bus to Washington**  
**Walking Washington to QE Park (Buriton) - 29 miles**  
**Return by bus and train via Petersfield**



**Day seven: 6<sup>th</sup> June 2012**  
**Washington to Amberley – 6 miles**

We chose the most promising four days from the long-range weather forecast - and walked into the heavy weather that swept most of Britain the week after the Queen's Jubilee. The map promised views of the Isle of Wight on the first day, but visibility was measured in yards.

After walking under dull skies we fetched up in Amberley. The village boasts a pottery and a castle, now a hotel, and a lot of amateur artists were trying to capture its charm.



Like most walkers we stayed just outside the village at the Sportsman pub, which remarkably offered this view from our bedroom window of the 'Wild Brooks', a protected grazing marshland.

**Day eight: 7<sup>th</sup> June 2012**  
**Amberley to Cocking – 12 miles**

Chuck was apprehensive that the twelve miles that lay before us would prove well beyond his maximum. We left the Sportsman in a light rain and climbed back to the ridge, passing poppies, wild roses and a bee orchid en route. As we reached the top the heavens opened and we were drenched all the way.



Habitation was sparse, so we were vastly relieved to find a farmer's shed where we could munch our lunch under dry cover. The young farmer was also hoping the sun would come out some day soon, as he was about to plant his maize crop.

We plodded on through the rain and mist, and strangely neither of us was especially tired at the end of this long day. We arrived at Cocking, miraculously in the sun. It took us a while to find our digs as the tea room which housed them has yet to recover from a flood.

The bedrooms were delightful, the garden was attractive, the Bluebell, the gastro-pub down the road was excellent and the house opposite, where we breakfasted, had an ancient well in the kitchen. You could stand on the glass cover and see the water many feet below.

**Day nine : 8<sup>th</sup> June 2012**  
**Cocking to South Harting – 7.5 miles**

A day of relentless wind. a force eight gale, gusting higher, mostly from the south, knocking us sideways, but occasionally backing west, forcing us to bend into it.

The path through the woods was littered with leaves and stout branches, so we kept a wary eye on the twisting limbs overhead. While sheltering in the lee of this string of three tumuli called 'The Devil's Jump' we heard a crash in the forest which startled the cattle. A tree had blown down. In the woodland path above South Harting we found a memorial, still maintained, to a German airman, apparently the first to be killed in the Battle of Britain.



Anthony Trollope lived locally. In fact there is a writers' trail identifying the residences not just of Virginia Woolf and Trollope, but Galsworthy, Kipling and others who found the South Downs a congenial place to write.



The sun came out as we walked towards South Harting through the woods, thick with wild garlic, and past the pond with ducklings walking on the lily pads.

South Harting is a prosperous village where the community has got together to ensure the survival of the village shop and to support a bus service. Eric Gill designed the war memorial. Until a couple of weeks ago there were two pubs in this village. Now there is none. One is being redeveloped and the landlord of the second had just hanged himself. So, dark forces lurk beneath the tranquil vistas of West Sussex. The elderly landlady drove us to the Three Horseshoes, a cosy country pub in nearby Elsted, which provided good food and great beer from the wood.



Our 16<sup>th</sup> century B&B in South Harting.



**Day ten : 9<sup>th</sup> June 2012**

**South Harting to Queen Elizabeth Country Park (Buriton) – 3.5 miles**

**Return by bus and train via Petersfield**

On the last day of stage three the sun came out and we had a jolly half-day stroll —



— being overtaken on the final leg by the vanguard of one thousand marathon competitors running in two or three hours more or less the last 26 miles that we had walked over the past four days.

We are pleased and refreshed, with tans on the back of our hands and the lower part of our faces, and now felt confident about the final stretch to Winchester, which will involve two twelve or thirteen mile stages!

#### Stage Four:

By train to Petersfield and taxi to QE Park (Buriton)  
Walking QE Park (Buriton) to Winchester - 25 miles  
Return by train from Winchester



Day eleven: 21<sup>st</sup> August 2012

Walking from Queen Elizabeth Park (Buriton) to Meonstoke – 12 miles

We deferred the final 25 miles till the weather forecast was more encouraging, but we had to commit ourselves a few days in advance to be sure of accommodation. Summer was running out: we were too late for swifts, and the swallows were ominously collecting on the power lines.

The first day was overcast, but at least it was warmer than June. There was more road work and fewer stretches of downland than before, but the fields were golden with stubble and the margins were full of flowers. Now the predominant colour was purple. The fields and open uplands were colonised by drifts of wild marjoram and scabious and knapweed, thistles and harebells, and campanula thrived in shady hedgerows.

There was yellow, too: agrimony and mullein and ragwort; and pink: greater and rose-bay willowherb. Red was flashed by poppies, and 'Lords and Ladies' in the shade. Wild clematis twisted through the hedges. And some blackberries were already ripe and sweet. Partridges startled us, rising up at our feet with a whirr of wings. We saw a kite, the occasional rabbit, and once a vole ran across the path. The highlight of the day was Old Winchester Hill, a spur of the downs





which was used for burials in the Bronze Age and fortified in the Iron Age. Now it is a mass of wild flowers. The views are fantastic, even on a cloudy day.

From this fort we dropped down to a path along the long-defunct Meon Valley Railway line and found our way to the excellent Bucks Head in Meonstoke, and sat in the sun (yes!) for a few minutes till the landlord returned. We weren't the only walkers staying there so travellers' tales were exchanged over dinner in the bar.



Meonstoke church

**Day twelve: 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2012**  
**Walking Meonstoke to Winchester – 13 miles**  
**Overnight at the Wykeham Arms**





Our longest stretch, but very pleasant weather, mostly along lanes through farmland, but with some downland and some views to north, south and west. The route actually passed a pub for the first time, but too soon for lunch. We ate the leftovers in our rucksacks later at the edge of a field and then lay back for a rest. On flints — not on sheep-bitten grass — among groundsel and ragwort — not cowslips — but dozing in the sun. For the first time.

Long before we reached Winchester we could hear the traffic on the M3. We passed through a couple of small villages which seemed to be nothing but a few exclusive houses with huge garages. All that money, but they can never be free of the motorway roar.



By extremely good fortune, a couple of miles outside the city the Great God Random had deposited a couple of pristine leaflets by the path. We picked up one, a map with guided walks around Winchester, which helped us find our way to the Wykeham Arms nestled in the narrow streets between the cathedral and the college.



We crossed over the M3 and found our way into the centre of Winchester, past the college to the Wykeham Arms. It is not just a very picturesque old pub with a good kitchen; it has some delightful rooms. Ours boasted a chandelier, dozens of pictures and a splendid wood-panelled bathroom with an exposed brick fireplace.

Our arrival was well timed – it started raining as we made our tea. A good meal before a short walk through the cathedral close

and into the High Street (just to check that there was one).

**Day thirteen: 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2012**  
**Returning by train from Winchester**

Our found map proved very useful as we didn't find another in the city. We followed the walks around, visiting the cathedral, the Great Hall with an old (but, we assume not original) Round Table attributed to King Arthur, the old mill and the walk between the old walls and the river Itchen. Lunch with an old friend sitting outside the Wykeham Arms marked the end of our walk. 100 miles in four months. Possibly a record for dilly-dallying, but we made it, despite the weather.



Anthony Gormley stands in the Crypt of Winchester Cathedral, where the water sometimes comes up to his thighs.