

## **MBP Conference Speech – Monday 24<sup>th</sup> May 2010**

### **One Day for Morecambe Bay**

#### **David Whiteside, Bay Walker, Walking Around the Bay**

Good afternoon Lancaster!

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to talk to you about my walk around – not across - the Bay last week, Saturday to Friday, in the glorious Spring weather.

Before I left Fleetwood, and on my return by train in under three hours door-door, the Fylde coast had a couple of sporting success stories, but I achieved something quite different: covering 120 miles of Morecambe Bay coast, hugging the shore line, in 44 walking hours over seven days. Sponsorship-in-kind came from Timberland (socks, t-shirts, bag and cap – all you need really!) and I raised North of £200 in sponsorship funds along the way for Diabetes UK, the RSPB at Leighton Moss and the Arnside / Silverdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Jen Walker (honestly!) and her new RSPB colleague Michael met with me at Warton Crag on the Tuesday afternoon and I also met with Lucy Barron of the AoNB and her colleagues at the Bittern Centre in the Old Station Building near Arnside Viaduct on Tuesday morning.

This day of ‘Brief Encounters’ close to Carnforth was Day Four and just about the middle of my journey before the old railway embankment and crossing the Kent at

Levens Bridge, a favourite spot of mine for over 30 years.

And I can report from my field work that the fast-flowing Kent is still home to Grey and Pied Wagtails, Dipper, Sand Martin, Swan and Nuthatch – just six of the 60 species of birds I counted along my way around the Bay, its four major estuaries and their minor tributaries, all ten of them. Good evidence to support the positive birding health of the Bay.

But already I'm in the middle of my journey when I need to start at the beginning...and the journey actually began in Fleetwood, my home town and place of birth, when for as long as I can remember I have known and loved the stunning landscape of the Bay that was always the panorama from 'my back yard'.

Pre BBC Coast and even before Paul Theroux's 'The Kingdom by the Sea' this trip was in its planning stage using OS map reading skills and with a working, walking title: 'Whiteside to Walney'!

Geography 'O' and 'A' Levels came and passed and a Science Degree followed and a career in business development but I somehow never found the time to fulfil my ambition.

I had very personal reasons for finally starting my journey - I literally was walking away from a lot of problems - and let's just say I look much happier, healthier and relaxed here and now than I did in the pre-

trip press coverage I received in the Fleetwood Weekly News!

So, having walked the walk allow me to talk the walk, the ramblings of a rambler if you will!

I left Fleetwood on the 9:30 ferry ‘cross the Wyre to Knott End and a 15-mile trek over coastal path, marsh and embankment via Pilling, Cockerham, Cockersands Abbey, Plover Scar (where I too spotted the [www.mycoastline.org](http://www.mycoastline.org) sign!), Crook Farm (“Free range children and animals, please drive slowly”), Glasson Dock and the famous Stork Inn at Conder Green, the roof over my head that night with a hearty meal and an even heartier breakfast – one of the best I have ever eaten!

I started my bird count with nesting Swan, an albino Mallard duckling, Redshank and Dunlin and what was to become daily sightings and hearings of Skylark, Shelduck, Pheasant, Lapwing, Chaffinch, Goldfinch, Heron, Pied Wagtail and the ubiquitous piping, orange bill and black and white plumage of the Oystercatchers.

Wheatear and Curlew were absent where they had been present only three weeks earlier when Lapwing were still sat on eggs in ploughed fields and the North Easterlies were blowing far stronger.

Signs of the times of the later Spring I thought?

Other ‘Thoughts for the Day’ included:

- Where do all these Oystercatchers nest?!

- Would I see Ringed Plover as I had done at Rossall Point where they were scraping, mating and displaying until disturbance on the shingle by dogs and their walkers?
- And, what *is* the difference between a Scaer and a Scar??

All of the above and more was answered, revealed and explained as my walking week progressed...in the end, everything was just there, waiting to be seen and found, right in front of me. All I had to do was keep my eyes and ears open, my feet on the ground and take one step at a time...just keep walking!

After the first of several generous overnight discounts, I was on my way from the Stork and en route to Heysham up and down the Lune, in and out of Lancaster and down the Overton / Middleton peninsula to Sunderland Point.

This second day was tough – a stretching 22 miles in cold wind but it was countered with an instant natural high: my first and only sighting of a solitary Little Ringed Plover after a tip off from a local birder at Freeman's Pool.

Jen at Leighton Moss had also helped with my planning and put me in touch with the delightful Alan and Cyn Smith at The Haven on Sunderland Point and reaching their homely abode at 5:30pm on the Sunday was a milestone moment.

Alan and Cyn are volunteers at Leighton Moss and a lovely retired couple, full of life and energy, they treated

me like the long-lost son they never had and spoiled me rotten with tea, toast, home-made rhubarb crumble, good conversation, local birding tips and set me on my way to Heysham via Sambo's Grave.

Sunderland and Basil Points were both impressive and dramatic crossings with the back-drop of the Bowland Fells and ever closer views of Heysham Power Station and the Lakeland Fells. The Lakes really came into view at St Patrick's after the bizarre juxtaposition of a nuclear power station betwixt a caravan park and a nature reserve.

It was one part of the journey that I had to speed walk through to get to my B&B for Night Two: the appropriately named 'Dunlin' on Sandyland promenade.

But, ever-determined, I stayed on track and took notice of the Fact Trail at my feet that answered one of my earlier questions: "Stones and rock carried down from the Lake District during the last Ice Age has stayed in parts of the Bay, held in place by mud and sand. These areas are known locally as scears".

Day Three and it was good morning sleepy Morecambe! I met with a very interesting fellow B&B guest, Helen, a real character, Blackburn-raised, now a widower living in Wales, doing her own thing after a career as an 'Hello' girl and working her way up to Practice Manager at an "*old-fashioned Doctors' surgery*" – the implication being no Lady Doctors!

Two miles in to the Morecambe stretch and I arrived at the art deco splendour of the Midland. It was always going to be tough to Arnside but I had the planned incentive to enjoy this stretch of the coast, a gorgeous part of the world, and then luxuriate in boutique style and sublime comfort for some well-earned R&R at No 43 on Arnside Promenade.

But first I had to get there. I eventually arrived after 7pm looking filthy and, well, just like I'd walked 57 coastal miles!

Lunch was on the banks of the Keer and the mid-afternoon meet and photo opportunity at Warton Crag with the Peregrines and Ravens, the Jackdaws and Shelducks, and the Jens and Michaels.

They provided much needed moral support and my first ice cream of the week. Stylishly combining smelly t-shirts and grubbier shorts, sun and sun cream, I really was getting into my holiday spirit!

From Crag via Causeway to Jenny Brown's Point, Jack Scout and the Giant's Seat was effortless along what has got to be one of the most beautiful stretches of sea cliff, rocky shingle, coves, mud and sand in the UK.

Having previously navigated this section at its most inaccessible, going South in Winter and North in very early Spring this year, I was lucky to be passing through at a lower tide and finally uncover nesting Oystercatchers and enjoy some mudlarking antics on my own in the wet sands.

But after two tumbles too many and a couple of cuts and bruises I decided to play safe and go back inland to terra firma.

At low tide I didn't get to see the rushing incoming tide but I was beginning to discover the four Bs of Walking feeling Blistered, Bruised, Battered and something else beginning with B!

Day Four and my send-off from Lucy B. after packed lunch from Tim at the (B)akehouse in Arnside, a very generous discount from Lesley at No 43 - £100 off the bill to go to the AoNB - and £20 from passing Dubliners who I breakfasted with.

I finally got to Grange-over-Sands at 8pm after a glorious cross-country trek around the banks of the Kent and its farm lanes. First Aid was requested at Levens Hall for my badly blistered left foot and Farmer Richard Wilkinson at High Foulshaw guided me on my way to elevated views of estuary, fell and farmland from the embankment. Richard is also a landowner at Warton so lucky for me I didn't trespass on his land!

Curlew were now 'curlee' mellow calling and visible in the fields under Ulpha with Sand Martin diving and banking around the Kent. A Sparrowhawk shot in and out of a hedgerow by a farm to catch its Sparrow Snack, Linnet Lunch or was it a Finch Feast for its chicks? Flippin Fluke reminded me of Fluke Hall. I was in my element. And Susannah called to wish me well and sounded very envious of me out and about in 22 Degrees

of sunshine with more Morecambe Bay beauty yet to discover...

The last three miles are always the toughest but I really had to push through the pain barrier to get around the Meathops and the Wooded Valley and cross the Canal-like Winster to get to Kents Bank Road in Grange and stay with my old Geography teacher, Father Alf Parker, at St. Charles.

I seriously considered giving up at this point! My feet were hammered and, as an insulin-dependent diabetic, I was out of blood sugar test strips, short on insulin and clean out of clean clothes!

Free National Healthcare at the local surgery (thank you again Lady Doctor Ruell!) and dressing care at the Co-op pharmacy from a sympathetic Walker Pharmacist soon sorted me out and the plan was to carry on, slowly, see how far I could get, catch a bus or train if necessary, but get to Ulverston and then take a day off!

That was the plan – ambitious as ever! I doggedly retreated North East past the Grange Duck Pond to continue my walk along the lower prom and got to Humphrey Head Point for lunch at 1pm. The feet and knees were bearing up and my head was in gear. ‘Serious Ks’ was the Mantra for the Day along with ‘All I Need Is With Me Here and Now’!

Annoyingly, stupidly and I just don’t know how but I missed stopping off at Guide Farm to meet Cedric and Olive Robinson! I still don’t know where the Farm is or

how I missed it – perhaps when I was speed walking again across the marsh from Kents Bank to Humphrey Head? Nice to see him on ‘Countryfile’ last night though!

Anyhow, Cark was reached by 5pm via airfield (no, I didn’t charter a plane!) and caravan park embankment and my favourite type of country path: unknown, narrow, flanked by hedgerows, cutting through farmland and crossing railtrack.

Now it was decision time. Do I push on for Ulverston, up and down the Leven via Greenodd, skirting the Holker Estate and Roudsea, or catch a train to Ulverston and check in to The Old Daltongate House for an early bath, supper and bed?

Sensible Plan B it was and the 5:30 train got me into Ulverston in ten minutes. Dinner in the Farmer’s Arms and a chance encounter with Pete the Restaurant Manager who also worked as an Inland Rescue Volunteer and knew the Foulney-Ulverston-Greenodd coast like he knew his restaurant menu! Plus a catch-up with my very supportive Mother who was in town with me for a couple of nights.

Her Father grew up in Ulverston having been born in Barrow so his life journey back to Fleetwood when I knew my Grandfather was the reverse of my Bay journey.

Ulverston became my base camp for three nights as I took a return train to Cark to walk back to Canal Foot via

the Holker-Roudsea-Greenodd route and through to Plumpton. Some six hours later I was drinking tea in The Bay Horse - a real find - and I discovered that the Ulverston Canal is one of the shortest, deepest and widest in the world. Or is this just local Laurel and Hardy folklore? Maybe it's the reason Pole Vaulting was invented as a competitive sport in Ulverston?! One thing is for sure: my Grandfather used to swim in it!

And so to my last day. Anne at the Old Daltongate had warned me of the dangerous rocky stretch of coast behind the Glaxo Smith Kline (GSK) factory but it didn't stop me venturing around this headland to find yet more nesting Oystercatcher (this time with young chicks), Shelduck and, at last, Wheatear.

I was troubled about finishing my walk and for once hadn't eat a full breakfast! Not good as my blood sugars were low when I had to scramble up the watch heap behind GSK! But why was I panicky about completion? Was it a Hitchcockian-inspired fear of mobbing Terns? A sense of anti-climax? Not looking forward to going back to work? What to do next?

Actually, I just didn't want to stop walking!

After seven days and 120 miles of glorious coastal path, marsh, embankment, farm lanes, promenade, planks of wood across ditches, sea cliff, crag, old railway lines, headland, farmland, fields, private estate and nature reserve, I'd nearly run out of coast and time!

But when I finally found myself on Foulney, cutting across Rampside Sands before an incoming tide, with the Terns, Oystercatchers, Wheatear, Eider, Dunlin and, at last, Ringed Plover, it felt just right to stop.

And I was met by RSPB Reserve Warden David, an insulin-dependent Diabetic, with a love of birds, nature and the narrow causeway of sand, shingle, stones and scar called Foulney Island.

So, it was 'Fleetwood to Foulney' rather than 'Whiteside to Walney'. It's still there to come back to at a more leisurely pace with the further delights of the Lyth Valley, Conishead Priory, Holker Hall, Roudsea, Humphrey Head, Meathop and Dallam awaiting my footprints.

What more can I tell you as a fully qualified Bay Walker?

Certainly leave only footprints and take only photos!

Enjoy the moments. Look where you are putting your feet but look above you and around you. It's where all the Oystercatchers nest!

And there was no loneliness for this long-distance walker.

Ultimately it was all about the physical challenge, the sense of adventure and achievement, covering new ground, giving a bit back to the charities, the restorative benefits of activity in the very fresh outdoors, a chance to

get a coastal tan, stay in some gorgeous places, eat wonderful local food and, yes, just 'because it's there' and simply because the Bay is such a great place to be...

And what next? Well, 'Across the Bay' from Arnside to Kents Bank with Cedric, the Cumbria Coastal Way, the Lancaster Canal to Preston and maybe a bit of the Coast to Coast.

Plus getting involved in beach cleans with Susannah and her team. Next ones in my diary are Piel Island on Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> June and Chapel Island on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> July.

I'd urge you all to do the same to keep our Bay Beautiful.