



My story of the Walk is about why this bit of road is my favourite spot on any of the Louise Smalley Walks, and what the LSW means to me.

Firstly, a bit of background. In November 2010 I had what you could call a “nervous breakdown” at work, brought on by stress. As I had chest pains I was taken to hospital as a precaution but I have limited memory of that day, so It was a surprise to me a couple of days later that I noticed that I’d had my chest shaved to attach the ECG (heart monitor) leads.

I am not writing this to have you feel sorry for me or pity me. That’s not the point of this story : I consider myself to be very, very lucky and compared to most I have a great life, in part due to the LSW and the people in it.

I was offered medication for my depression but, although I would have taken it if I was told it was absolutely necessary, I asked if there was an alternative. I was advised that - coupled with cognitive behaviour therapy - walking was good. (It is !!)

It was quite a few months before I told any of my fellow Walkers, starting with the one who was my Walk partner at the time, and who is still in the LSW but now in one of the Support Teams. When I told him it was like I'd just said what I'd had for breakfast. It was something he didn't know about me until I said it, but it didn't change anything : we were the same people carrying on with our lives just the same. I couldn't have received a better reaction (non-reaction) : no judgement. This response was repeated over and over again the more people I told : listening, empathy, an occasional welcome hug, and I got to hear several similar stories in return to strengthen the bond between us all.

However, I do continue to self-judge. I'm still embarrassed by what happened to me, and feel that I did it to myself. Stress to me should be what is felt by someone in fear of their life on a daily basis, or who has somebody else's life in their hands, not me in a job I had come to hate, but stress affects us all differently. A thing that is easy for one person to cope with is the thing that brings another down, and although I am hard on myself I am very supportive of others.

Some people's depression overwhelms them constantly, so I realise that I am fortunate that mine is mild and just a small but significant part of my life, in the same way that the road to Shillito Wood is only a small part of the Monsal Head route. I've chosen to write about it here as a stepping stone to the joy of walking and the LSW, which are much greater parts of my life.

I was reminded recently that my reaction to stress, and my associated depression, will always be part of who I am: it's just how I deal with it that changes. This was said to me by another LSW member, and was after what I described as a "wobble" at an LSW Presentation Night. I was due to say a few words but, even in the midst of a group of people I know well, I stressed myself out, had a panic attack and backed off. Again no-one judged. I'm quite happy to make a spectacle of myself in my 'silly' hat (although – to me – it is the most sensible thing I've ever bought) or to respond to comments aimed in my direction, but standing up as a presenter is one of the major triggers for my lack of self-confidence and lack of self-esteem. One day I may find a coping mechanism for that, but for now I am grateful to have people who remind me that it is ok for me to be me, and accept me as that person. The LSW is full of such extraordinarily superb people.

So, you now have an inkling about what the LSW means to me, but that's not the whole story. My first encounter with the LSW was when the Walk was for a group I was associated with. I didn't walk, but to show willing my wife and I joined Support Team 1. After we packed up the first checkpoint I looked back, and there was no sign that we had ever been there. I remember thinking that the LSW must be highly organised, and that the level of care for the environment went far further than just repeating the "Keep Britain Tidy" anti-litter mantra. I wasn't wrong.

At the end of that year's Walk, one of our group's Walkers challenged me to walk the following year, and I've done it every year since, with my wife stopping on the Support Teams.

What I particularly admire about the LSW is the nomination process. You have to be a Walker or Supporter to nominate or vote for the one (and one only) worthy cause walked for in any given year. I do vote each year, but I actually don't care who I walk for : the chosen group will be a good one because of how it is picked, and I get to help people that I would never have helped otherwise.

In 2012 it was the Monsal Head Walk. The week before, we had all been told that we were adults, expected to be responsible for ourselves and that if we chose to walk on our own we could. As my Walk partner was injured I was then able to “buddy up” or not, depending on how my Walk progressed. As it turned out I did do some parts of that Walk solo. One of those sections was a stretch of tarmac leading to Shillito Wood.

On that road to Shillito Wood it was still early morning and the air had that crispness that makes one’s skin tingle. I stopped for a moment, looked around, and realised I could see no-one ahead of me nor behind me, but I felt great. I felt really great. I was alive, I was helping others by doing something I loved, and I knew - I just knew - that something good was coming my way. I’d left my hated job, been to several interviews, but on Walk day I’d been between jobs for 19 months. Less than 4 weeks later I got the job I still do now, and it is the best job I’ve ever had.

To repeat, I am lucky to have my life, and I will spend the next several years giving as much back to the LSW as I possibly can.

I have started enough of these Walks now to believe that I will complete them whatever preparation I have done. I have never suffered chafing (you’re starting to hate me) ; rarely had any kind of blister, even in the early days (now you really hate me) ; but I have lost the occasional toenail (you’re beginning to like me again). Doing these Walks is an emotional experience so if you see me with tears in my eyes at the end, they are not tears of pain but tears of elation.

P.S. The 2019 Monsal Head Walk was another great Walk for me. It is still my favourite route, and this time I walked nearly all of it with a ‘newbie’, and I was able to reassure her that, even though we were at the back, we were doing well. I did think we’d catch up with other Walkers towards the end, but that just shows how exceptional the Support Teams are – reviving tired and sore Walkers and sending them on their way.

On the way from Hay Wood to Shillito Wood we met up with a fellow Walker who was struggling with a leg injury. We were keeping him company until we got into the next checkpoint, where he was going to retire, but as we walked along the road to Shillito Wood the ambulance drove towards us and asked if anyone needed a lift. He accepted their offer and finished his journey on wheels as we continued on foot.

Checkpoints came and went, and the support was never less than incredible (as usual). At Checkpoint 8 my walking companion from the start went on with a group of ‘sweepers’ and I followed on a bit later with my original Walk partner, once he’d completed his Support Team duties and become ‘my’ sweeper.

I was flagging a bit on the last mile into, and first mile out of that final Checkpoint. On arrival I had a ham bap thrust meaningfully – but with love – into my hand. It took me ages to consume it : I had a few chews; paused; had a few more chews; paused again etc. etc. It was as if I was “buffering” whilst downloading instructions on how to eat. Then, suitably fortified, I slowly returned to the process of putting one foot in front of the other and I really appreciated my ‘sweeper’ being with me as we left Harthill – it gave me an audience for my ‘man walking through treacle’ impression.

As anyone who has ever done one will tell you, there is nothing quite like the feeling you get when finishing a Louise Smalley Walk. It's a mixture of relief and pride and a dozen other emotions thrown in for good measure. So it was immensely gratifying to see the number of people outside the Royal Oak to cheer me in as last man. The coincidence of fireworks going off as I completed my final few strides was serendipity of the highest order, and I can't convince anyone that I didn't set it up.

"It's not a race."

I finished last, but I'm still a winner.

P.P.S. No blisters again !! I can feel your love !!!!



Howard Erskine