

A.J.B. Johnston and Mary Topshee

Walking the Cotswolds

Exploring Classic England Step by Step

A mere half hour from Moreton-in-Marsh, with an unknown number of hours to go before we'll reach our evening's destination, we begin to have niggling doubts about this hiking adventure. Not about our fitness level, at least not yet. That might come later on, for Bourton-on-the-Water and the 17-century inn where we are to stay the night is still perhaps 18 km away.



Though still fresh, we are stymied nonetheless. The Monarch's Way, as the ancient footpath is called, named after an escape route used during the English Civil War by the future Charles II, seems to have disappeared. To our right, on the other side of a sturdy fence, a herd of cattle gazes back. Beyond the herd, beyond the grassy field, we see the edge of a forest. To our left, on gently rising muddy and grass-tufted ground, lie more farmers' fields, without any cows.

No matter how much we squint at the fence posts, we find no clue as to which way the trail goes next. There should be a



yellow circle a couple of inches in diameter along with the words “Monarch’s Way.” Yet there is not.

We are no wiser when we trace our fingers over the line of green diamonds on the folded Ordnance Survey map, the map the walking tour company mailed to us a few weeks ago. Its scale does not tell us how to get out of this particular impasse.

For the better part of an hour we explore left and right in the cow-less fields, up and along the hill, mumbling frustrated guesses about which way to go. We chance upon a farmer. He greets us warmly, and explains that if we continue up the hill past his farmhouse we’ll find a trail that leads to Moreton-in-Marsh. *But that was the village from which we set out this morning.* Or, the farmer continues, we could march back down the hill to the field with the cows. If it’s on toward Longborough and Lower Swell we want, en route to Bourton-on-the Water, well then, the trail marker we seek is in that field. *It is?* Yes, on a low-cut stump out in the field.

Sure enough, the farmer is right. Distracted by the sight of all the cows, or maybe by our expectations of a clearly-marked parkland trail with a compacted path such as we typically see in

Canada, we'd not noticed the little yellow circle affixed to the stump a few inches from the ground. But then, that stump was about 60 metres from the fence where we'd stopped to stare at the cows.

So it was we learn our first important lesson about hiking through England's fabled Cotswolds: we're not in Canada anymore.

The idea to hike the Cotswolds came more or less out of the blue. We'd been in England

several times in recent years, but London was always the focus. It was time, we decided, to get out into the English countryside. And the region that called out to us from a few magazine articles and many a book or film reference was the Cotswolds. Its images showed a gently rolling countryside with storybook villages of mellow limestone buildings. Quintessential England. We wanted to check it out, and see if the region really could be as picturesque and charming as its publicity claimed.

The task we set for ourselves had a fitness as well as a cultural dimension. There were to be five days of walking in the north Cotswolds, which would add up to a total of about 80 kms (50 or so miles). On the advice of the company through which we made arrangements for our lodging, we would follow a circular route, with the company moving our luggage to the next inn during the day. For a couple born in the middle of the previous century that meant we had to make sure we were in shape. For several months leading up to the trip we tried to walk at least a couple of hours a day.

We took two days in London to shake off jet lag and to adapt to the five hour change in time zones. Then it was on to



Bath, the famous spa town of Roman origins that lies at the southern end of the range of Cotswolds hills. With its splendid Georgian architecture and ties to Jane Austen's life and times, and two of her novels, it's no surprise Bath draws a few million tourists each year. A peregrination through its streets and squares, up to the Circus and Royal Crescent is de rigeur. We dutifully paid homage at the Jane Austen Centre, strolled through the Assembly Rooms, and trekked through a couple of museums to get in the proper frame of mind for the hike ahead. Imbued with Bath's celebrated past, and recalling how Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy were accustomed to striding through farmers' fields and up and down hills and dales, we were ready to take the train to Moreton-in-Marsh, where our hikes begin.

Our inn is a Georgian-era building right on High Street, pub downstairs and a few rooms above. Breakfast the next morning is classic English fare: eggs any way we want, beans, grilled tomatoes, toast, fruit, cereals and all the rest. We eat more than our usual share. The day ahead is to be 20 km of hiking along paths to us unknown. As already described, we would need the extra energy when befuddled by a field of cows and an unseen marker on a stump.





From that point on we are more alert. We free ourselves of pre-conceptions as to how the network of Cotswolds trails are going to present themselves. Such routes are not the product of modern planners laying down trails and following parkland standards. They are ancient footpaths — public rights of way — and they cross countless farmers' fields. Sometimes they intersect and overlap. It is not always clear which trail is which. They go where they go according to some long forgotten rationale. There are an unknown number of stiles through which you pass, often taking you close to farm animals, whose treasures in the form of patties and pellets are best stepped over and around.

There are dense copses, and sometimes even forests. Occasionally the footpath goes right through a field of growing crops. From time to time there are bridleways for horses. Usually there are signs or stickers to guide you on, but when there's not, perhaps because a post has fallen down, you look for indications of a beaten earth path and carry on.

So, to hike in the Cotswolds, and we suspect anywhere else in England, requires not just a certain level of fitness but also a close study of the landscape through which you pass. The good

news is that the heightened focus deepens the experience. You not only end up in the right village and inn, where your luggage awaits, but you pay the absolute closest attention to every sight, sound and smell as you move along. It takes “living in the moment” to a new level. Being on automatic pilot, as one can do on a trail in a Canadian park, is ill advised. Walking the Cotswolds requires your eyes and brain as much as your legs. Every quarter hour is a quarter hour fully lived.

It’s now months since our return to Canada, yet we can still visualize most of the sights along the various walks. The buildings glowing yellow, because of the distinctive Cotswold stone, are firmly etched in our memories. So too we can still see the millions of ripe blackberries on brambles beside most of the paths. Impenetrable hawthorn hedges with tiny birds. Mourning doves coo the soundtrack of our advance. Ravens’ wings flapping overhead. Grand solitary oaks and beeches, and occasionally a seemingly primeval forest that conjured Robin Hood. Dozens of partridges take flight, while many hundreds (yes, many hundreds) of red-speckled pheasants scurry at the sound of our footfalls.

We step around an untold number of sheep and goats, who stare back bemused. We choose to be more cautious when entering fields of horses and long horned cattle. Once we discover a massive bull in the midst of a herd of cows, which prompts one to warn the other, cautionary finger raised, spelling in a whisper “B-U-L-L.” Luckily, the bull does not know how to spell, or at least takes no offence if he does. He stays where he is.

Lunch every day is in whatever village we make our way into around noon. All but one pub has Wi-Fi, so as we go along we upload the occasional image of our adventures for family and friends back home.

Our first day’s walk turns out to be about seven hours, extended because of the muddle near the beginning. Though time mostly well spent, we are nonetheless delighted to reach Bourton-on-the-Water, the so-called Venice of the Cotswolds. The shallow Windrush River winds through the village and passes under five footbridges. It makes for a setting like those miniature English villages people put out at Christmas. Here it is, full size and with-



out snow. Our inn was constructed in 1698, but with modernized rooms for travellers today.

Day two is a walk slightly longer than day one. The first hour or two takes us upriver following the Windrush. As fine a ramble as a person could wish. The landscape rolls gently, undulating like a Cape Breton golf course. We are sometimes under woodland cover, sometimes in open fields, and getting increasingly comfortable with cows and sheep.

Mid-afternoon, after a hearty lunch at the pub in little Guiting Power, we approach the vast green stretch on our map called Guiting Wood. What an elegant looking manor house stands atop a hill just before the forest begins. No, not as grand as Downton Abbey — well, what is — but the pile did make us think fleetingly of fictional Pemberley.

Into Guiting Wood we go, an hour or so of climbing up to the top, then an hour or so coming down. Never before or since will we see and hear so many pheasants. The cull must be tasty to those so inclined. Alas, things must be going a little too well. We cannot find where the woodland road we've been following branches off into the trail we want. No sign, no beaten earth track.



The dirt road curves back the way we've come, back up the forested hill. We retrace our steps hoping for a clue. Then we do it again. We enter open fields bordering the forest thinking they will provide a hint. Nothing. Well, nothing except for a stack of hay bales larger than any house.

So we opt to walk along a paved road we glimpse. It has to take us somewhere, somewhere we'll be able to locate on our map.

A quarter hour along the asphalt we spy a sign for the Warden's Way, the very trail we'd lost track of an hour before. Still an hour or so to Winchcombe, our evening's destination, but at least that distant hilltop village is now in sight.

The path descends a steep hillside, eventually across the grounds of Sudeley Castle, burial place of Katharine Parr, Henry VIII's sixth and final wife. Then up into Winchcombe where our suitcases are waiting in a 16th-century coaching inn. The evening ends well in its excellent restaurant.

Day Three begins with a tramp through more sheep fields then past the ruins of a Cistercian abbey, sent into dissolution by Henry VIII. We're heading for what turns out to be perfect Stanton, a mere four hours away. Stanton has no shops, but it has the



most charming houses and a wonderful hilltop pub. We stay at the top of a B&B, a house at least four centuries old.

Charmed by the Cotswolds landscape and its villages, we find ourselves wondering about real estate in this part of the world. Every sizeable village has at least one office and sometimes two. The listings in the windows offer “guide prices” that don’t sound too high, until converted into dollars. It seems wealthy Londoners and an international clientele discovered the Cotswolds years ago, which explains all the Audis, BMWs and Mercedes.

Though there are still many farmers and ordinary workers in the villages, a growing number of places are now owned by people with thick wallets who come on only a seasonal basis. As one writer wrote in a



recent magazine piece, the Cotswolds is the First World's First World.

Days Three and Four are spent on the most established of all the region's trails, the Cotswold Way. Its footpath is signed and marked at every decision point there is. One simply cannot go wrong. It is also by far the trail with the most foot traffic. So rarely anymore do we have the path entirely to ourselves. We follow the ups and downs through delightful Broadway en route to Chipping Campden. Could there be a more English name?



Off in the distance from Broadway, atop a prominent ridge, stands a stone folly that dominates the countryside for miles around. Erected in the 1790s it's called the Broadway Tower. In the 1880s it was the country retreat of artists William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. Today it houses a tea room, gift shop and museum. It's the destination for hundreds of hikers on any fine day, coming from either Broadway or Chipping Campden.

On the day we make the climb, we find it necessary to pause from time to time. The slope is steep. Yet having a 90-year old man with a cane coming up from below ensures we do not

pause too long. We do not want to be overtaken by someone thirty years older than us.

The view from the ridge becomes more spectacular the higher we climb. At the summit, filled with sense and sensibility, how could we not exclaim: “Is there such felicity in all the world, as this?”

Day Five sees us complete the circle, making our way back to the village where our journey had begun. Though by then accustomed to the many Cotswolds sights and vistas, we are nonetheless still charmed by little Broad Camden and intrigued by Blockley, with its history as a onetime mill town and then its history as a headquarters for the U.S. Army before D-Day.

Descending from the last majestic forest on our final leg, we make our way across what had once been wetland but long since reclaimed. We re-enter Morten-in-Marsh after what seems like a very long time away. A little tired, yes, but what sweet fatigue. We’d done what we’d set out to do, and the experience was even better than we’d hoped.

The intensity of walking 80 plus km in an endless series of beautiful settings cannot be easily put into words. Unlike motoring, or even cycling, one absorbs the details of sight and smell and sound at a level you simply cannot forget. Moving along at a good yet mostly silent pace, the memories become vivid, lived as opposed to observed. Months after our return, sometimes awake and sometimes asleep, we continue to stroll through the Cotswolds inside our heads.

During the winter of 2014, parts of the Gloucestershire region we walked through found themselves under water. Incessant rain caused rivers across southern England to flood. It’s not the first that it’s happened, nor will it likely be the last. Extreme and tumultuous weather events are becoming the norm around the globe.

The Windrush and other rivers of the Cotswolds will eventually go back down, and the picturesque villages and ancient footpaths will dry out. When exactly is of course impossible to say. But when they do, this Canadian couple is likely to go hiking the Cotswolds again. We’d like to see how the southern trails, hills and dales compare to those we met in the north.

A.J.B. Johnston and Mary Topshee live in Halifax. Should any reader wish to to ask them for more details about walking in the Cotswolds, please use the “Contact” link at ajbjohnston.com. John is also on Twitter @ajbjohnston.

