

22 April 2023: Long Walk: Three Choirs Way - Worcester to Munderfield Row

On Saturday 22 April, the 09.37 train from Gloucester arrived at Worcester Foregate Street Station on time at 10.20, and four Ramblers (Bruce, Helen and two Peters) continued along the Three Choirs Way, aiming for Munderfield Row, a village about half-way between Worcester and Hereford. The weather forecast had varied during the previous week, although rain had been a consistent feature. The forecast early on Saturday was: cloudy; 9°C mid-morning, rising to 12°C in the afternoon; with a SSE breeze at about 5mph; and scattered showers after 16.00.

Despite fog in Gloucester, Worcester was fog-free and there were some breaks in the cloud. From Foregate Street Station, we headed west past the southern end of the racecourse to the River Severn which we crossed on the Sabrina Footbridge (extensively refurbished and re-opened in early 2021). On passing the University, the sun appeared through breaks in the cloud and, two miles after setting out, we left the suburbs of Worcester for a wide expanse of arable farmland. Two miles later, we reached The Firs in Upper Broadheath, Elgar's birthplace, now in the hands of the National Trust. A little later, a substantial log provided a convenient place to sit for a late-morning coffee (together with delicious flapjack baked for us by Helen).

We continued west through sparsely populated arable land and pasture, with a few scattered hamlets and small villages. Grazing cattle and horses had churned the ground into deep mud, making it hard going and slow. We passed the isolated and disused Blackfield Cottage, which we thought would pose a very real challenge for any enthusiast bent on restoring it. After Broad Green, a neatly kept village, the terrain became hillier and in the small village of Doddenham, a vineyard was selling wine, with a bottle of sparkling white costing £22.

As we began a steep climb to the Ankerdine Common Nature Reserve, a well-meaning lady shouted to say that, if we continued, we would miss the bluebells. As we were running late and had already seen a lot of bluebells, we continued. On the 489 ft amsl summit of Ankerdine Hill, the half-way point of the walk, some 40 minutes behind schedule, we ate our picnic lunches in sunshine with glorious panoramic views over Worcestershire and Herefordshire. We had lost time because of the mud, a large number of stiles and some challenging hill climbs.

After lunch, we descended steeply to Knightwick, where, despite originally planning to stop at The Talbot Inn, an old coaching inn, we eschewed its delights to recoup some of the lost time. After crossing the River Teme (an SSSI rising in mid-Wales and joining the River Severn 40 miles south of Worcester), we headed south-west. The terrain remained hilly and sparsely populated, with a mixture of pasture, woodland, hop-fields and vineyards. Between Knightwick Manor and Suckley Green, we crossed the long-since disused Worcester - Bromyard - Leominster Railway (which opened in 1897 and closed in 1964) and passed Suckley Station, now a private residence. By now, the sky was darkening, and it seemed that the showers forecast for 16.00 were not far away. With two hours to our destination, we decided to press on, and messaged our drivers - Colin and Lesley - to let them know.

After passing Stanford Bishop, we crossed the immature River Frome and walked past the very extensive Upper Venn Farm. The going after lunch was much less muddy than it had been in the morning and there were fewer stiles. From being 40 minutes late at the mid-point of the walk, we had made up 35 minutes by omitting the visit to The Talbot Inn and maintaining a brisk pace on farm tracks. At about 17.30, light rain started falling which was pleasantly refreshing. Then, within sight of our destination - Munderfield Row - and only 5 minutes behind our original schedule, we were confronted with an enormous field of oil seed rape. Although the footpath sign pointed across the middle of the field, the rape was dense and about 5 ft high and we had no real alternative but to make a substantial detour around the field boundary. Notwithstanding, we arrived at Munderfield Row at 18.10, only 10 minutes behind our original ETA. We were met by Colin and Lesley, who whisked us back to Gloucester for about 19.00.

We had walked 17.25 miles in 7 hours rather than the 16 miles determined during the planning phase because of not allowing sufficiently for the twists and turns. Helen set a personal best for the number of steps in one day: 42,000. Our average speed - 2.46 mph was similar to our speed on the previous walk across the Malverns to Worcester. The conditions could not have been much better apart from the morning mud.

Peter Barrett