

Hadrian's Wall Walk
12-19 September 2006
A Diary of Recollections by Willard Fraize

12 Sept.

We convened at Clifton House Hotel in Newcastle after about 18 hours of travel including, in the case of four of us (Bob Lambert, Charlie and Julie Bond, and I), a flight from Heathrow to Manchester and rail travel from Manchester Airport to Newcastle, followed by a slog up the long hill to our hotel. What a welcome sight it was.

Our innkeeper, Catrina, suggested an authentic Italian restaurant in an obscure/remote part of Newcastle that we would never have found on our own. Two taxis transported all twelve of us (the 11 members of Group I plus Anne Filson, the leader of the one-day-behind-us Group II, who arrived in time to join us). In my view, it was one of the best group meals of our trip, for reasons of both the quality of the food and wine and the friendliness of the wait staff, catalyzed by Anne's cheery and knowledgeable interaction with them.



For the record, Group I, led by Joe Fleig consisted of:

- Joe Fleig (Mary Ellen was not able to join us because of work commitments)
- Charlie and Julie Bond
- Connie Slack
- Lea Gallardo
- Fred Massey and Sue Whitsitt
- Norm and Barbara Happ
- Bob Lambert
- Will Fraize

13 Sept.

Today, we were reminded of what the "full English breakfast" is—something we'll experience with only minor variations at every inn we stay in: fried eggs; bacon (Canadian style); sausage; fried potatoes, fried tomatoes and mushrooms, and fried bread (cooked in the bacon grease, I was told). Can the English really be healthy eating this fatty a breakfast every day? As our week went on, we learned to ask for variations, like porridge, poached eggs, and yogurt and fruit (rarely available).



With that rich breakfast under our belts, we left, by taxi, for Walls End and the fort and museum/gift shop at Segedunum where we picked up our first Hadrian's Wall Passport stamp (five more to go to certify that we did the whole wall!), had a bunch of group photos taken by Anne using just about all the cameras we were carrying, said goodbye to Anne knowing that she and her group would be just one day behind us—but oh, so out of reach—for the next

week, and began our hike. Our way was to be guided by pointing signposts labeled *Hadrian's Wall Path* (HWP) and a trail marker consisting of a white acorn. To the great credit of the English Heritage organization, the path markings were faultless and ever-present; we'd have to work at it to get lost!

Today's walk was nearly all along the north shore of the River Tyne with the city of Newcastle Upon Tyne to our right. I was the dorky one who carried a detailed map of our path and surroundings in a plastic map case dangling from my neck. I preferred the map while Sue and others read about the areas we were passing through in a very detailed guidebook. For the first 2/3 of our walk, we were mainly on brick or asphalt paths and, for short distances, roads. We enjoyed looking at the arched Millennium Bridge suspended by angled cables from a balancing counter-weight truss, a Costco warehouse store (selling tyres instead of tires), and other sights of river-side Newcastle.

We stopped for lunch well short of the mid-point of today's walk, where there was both a deli and a bistro/café sharing a common patio overlooking the river. Here we learned that such sidewalk eateries jealously guard their seating space, forcing those who purchase their lunch at the deli to eat at a separate patio space from us café patrons. What's one lunch apart when there's so much togetherness ahead for us? After another few miles, the HWP became a soft (dirt) path tracing along the edge of the river.

In mid-afternoon we stopped at a historical marker at the Newburn Battle site. While resting a bit there, a young man with a full pack walked into the site for a few minutes rest. Amazingly, he had started the previous morning (12 Sept) from the west end of the walk (Bowness-on-Solway) and intended to reach the eastern end at Walls End this evening, having done the entire Wall walk (84 miles) in just two days. We sheepishly told him we were taking 7 days, but then again, we're much older!

About 3:30PM we reached a place where the path turns abruptly right and crosses a lush golf course. Five of our group chose to continue along the river to reach their lodging for the night more quickly. We remaining six crossed the golf course, sounding a large, deep-throated, gong, put there for just this purpose, to alert the golfers that we were crossing. Sure enough, the golfers heard us, as one yelled a hearty "fore!" We trudged up a steep

hill, passing through a very posh neighborhood in a new development in Heddon-on-the-Wall. As we turned a corner, with less than two miles to go to our destination (Iron Sign Farm), we spotted a welcome sight: the Swan Pub in the sunny beer garden of which we all enjoyed a cold brew.

So far, we'd walked over 17 miles, according to Charlie's incredibly useful GPS. Our instructions from the tour company (Contours) had told us that we could call the innkeeper from Heddon-on-the-Wall and he would come for us and return us to this spot the following morning. But we were feeling so good (not because of the brews only) that we decided just to keep walking to the Iron Sign Farm since it was right along the HWP anyway.

Shortly, we came upon one of the largest intact segments of the original wall—a photo-op we took full advantage of.

We continued on, arriving at about 6PM and finding the innkeeper, Owen Little, slightly miffed because he'd been waiting for our call and was beginning to get a little concerned for us. We soothed him over, cleaned up, and returned shortly to the dining room for a great supper cooked by Mr. Little himself, who is a retired teacher of chefs! Our meal consisted of potato-leek soup, entrées of salmon or steak, steamed carrots and broccoli, new potatoes, half an "old" potato skin filled with a cheesy mashed potato, stewed squash and tomatoes, and plum crumble and plum-apple pie for dessert. These long walks have their end-of-day rewards!



Our mileage for the day: **19.3 miles**



14 Sept.

We awoke to a wet day, heavily overcast with mist in the air. After a delicious breakfast that included fruit (!), we left a little after 9AM, not knowing when or where we'd meet up with our five colleagues who spent the night at Bistro en Glaze, a mile or two down the road or about 4 miles along the stretch of path through Heddon-on-the-Wall that they had not had the pleasure of trekking yesterday. As we started out, rain jackets were in order to deal with the light rain and mist. Our first stop was at the Robin Hood

Inn about 3.5 miles west. As we were enjoying our coffee in this cheery inn, our colleagues showed up! It was a good thing, too, since none of us had read our HW Passports to see that the second stamping location was, indeed, the Robin Hood Inn—a fact that Joe Fleig reminded us



of. With passports stamped (a self-administered process), we continued on for another four miles, passing through a region of crags (rocky terrain with lots of ups and downs), reaching a large inn (the Errington) at The Portgate where we stopped for sandwiches and a delicious carrot-barley soup.

Continuing on, still in misty, slightly rainy weather, we soon encountered the Stanley Plantation—a densely wooded region that, because of the foggy/misty air took on an other-worldly, very spooky appearance, like something out of a Harry Potter novel. We arrived at Chollerford and our inn for the night, the Crown Inn, about ½ mile north of Chollerford in Humshaugh, at about 4:45PM. Just as we arrived, a thunderstorm broke, marking the beginning of an evening of significant rain.



The Crown Inn is a family-run place, recently purchased by a mother-daughter team who seem to provide most of the labor for the place. The young bartender was fun to talk with. He had recently decided that the auto mechanic apprenticeship he had been enrolled in was not for him! Bartending, with its contact with the public, was what he wanted for a career. He draws a good brew!

After a warming beer, we headed for our rooms and the shower—notice that shower is singular! Five of us had to share the one bathroom. Surprisingly, we coordinated our sharing perfectly! We ate dinner at the Crown Inn; in my case, it was a lamb shank dinner with red wine. We heard that the forecast for tomorrow was for clearing and sunny. We ordered pack lunches for tomorrow, since there are almost no restaurants along our upcoming path.

Our mileage for the day: **14.7 miles**

15 Sept.

True to the forecast, we awoke to a beautifully sunny day! After another English breakfast (with muesli and some fruit), we set off down the hill to Chollerford where Connie, Bob, and I enjoy wandering through the beautiful garden of George's Inn while awaiting the arrival of Sue and Fred.



We continued our westward trek, stopping within ½ mile to visit the Chesters Roman Fort and Museum. The Museum was not yet open, but the self-serve passport stamping station (our 3rd of 6) was found attached in a small box to the front wall of the museum. We continued hiking for about 1.5 miles along roads before

taking off through fields. For the next several miles, the HWP will parallel the main highway (a two-lane road). The terrain is noticeably more hilly, a foretaste of the mighty crags to follow this afternoon. We stopped for lunch across the road from a major ruin. After a quick lunch, we crossed the road and passed by the Brocolitia Fort (in private ownership) and the Mithraeum: the ruin of a small temple to Mithras, an Eastern god imported from what is now Iran, and worshipped by the Roman soldiers.



We were now seeing more real wall segments and were having to hike the crags (short, steep hills offering nice views of the country-side from the top). Several milecastles (major structures for housing the soldiers and their horses, located every Roman mile along the Wall) and turrets were visible. We passed by Housesteads, the best-known fort along the Wall, and continued on over several steep crags with two additional milecastles nestled between the peaks. Navigating the steep, rocky-

sloped crags was greatly aided by my use of two walking poles (until today I'd used only one pole).

Finally, we descended to Steel Rigg (ridge) and went to the parking lot where our host (Kath Dowle) picked us up, thanks to a call via a mobile phone borrowed from a local hiker. Two trips of Kath's Land Rover got the 11 of us safely to the Saughy Rigg (mossy ridge) Farm. We were promptly offered a beer to enjoy on the sunny patio before we cleaned up for dinner. What a treat!



There were about 20 guests staying at this, the largest inn we'll visit on the trip. Dinner was served to everyone, but, just as though you were sitting near the tail of an airplane as dinner choices are distributed, most of us found that, as the last to be asked, we no longer had the best menu choices available to us. Nevertheless, the meal (curried chicken, for me) was OK, while the socializing after dinner in the "parlor" where dessert and coffee were available was great. We met a group of young English women and a group of psychiatric hospital workers from New York, all of whom were "doing the Wall."

Our mileage for the day: **12.8 miles**

16 Sept.

After another English breakfast, Kath Dowle (or her husband?) drove us back to the Steel Rigg parking lot where we resumed our walk. The day was foggy and misty (and it stayed that way until about early afternoon). There were lots of steep crags to cover

today, beginning with Winshields Crag where we passed over the highest point of the HWP at 345 m. We reached this point within the first mile. Two poles were my mode of navigation, and I was glad of it! We passed many forts, milecastles, and turrets. We saw spectacular views (once the fog cleared), sheer cliffs, and quarries (e.g., Cawfields and Walltown), which were used by the Romans.



We stopped for a lunch break (mostly apples and energy bars) on one of the high crags. Thirlwall Castle ruin was an impressive sight as we passed it on our way to Gilsland and the Samson Inn where we enjoyed a mid-afternoon beer break. We were to return to the Samson Inn for dinner this evening, but we didn't know that at the time.

We continued on toward our destination, Birdoswald Fort, passing magnificent sections of The Wall with informative signs such as at the Willowford Bridge Remains. The HWP took a single, long, very steep switch-back to elevate us to a high bluff above the

River Irthing where Birdoswald Fort is located. I was lagging a little behind the others in my group (spent more time reading the information boards, I guess), with Norm and Barbara further behind me (Norm's leg, bruised while climbing a stone stile, is really hurting now.) While waiting for Norm and Barbara, I walked into the Birdoswald museum to get my fourth passport stamp. As I saw Norm and Barbara approaching, I started on the one-mile hike off the HWP to get to our inn for the night, the Hill on the Wall, with a quiet, dignified man, Dick, as our host. The Hill on the Wall is a grand and stately old building, built in 1595(!), that had been refurbished to make very nicely appointed rooms and superb baths—the best I saw on the trip!

After showering and changing, we were driven to Samson's Inn by its proprietor. Our dinners were good but the most memorable part of the evening came when our server, the proprietor's spouse, told us our dessert choices and took our dessert orders. She returned a few minutes later with an embarrassing announcement: her young children had gotten into the ice cream and there was no longer enough for all those wanting desserts with ice cream. The little children responsible for this ice cream theft were seen coyly hiding just outside the doorway to the room. We all had a good laugh over this one!

Our mileage for the day: **11.4 miles**, not including the additional 1-mile hike from the HWP across the field to the Inn.

17 Sept.

Today will be our shortest walk: from Birdoswald to Walton. The day started our partly sunny, after early AM fog, turning cloudy with a threat of rain by noon. To start, those of us



staying in the Hill on the Wall trekked about a mile along the same poorly-defined public path we traversed yesterday, crossing lamb-grazing fields, dipping into and climbing out of a steep ravine carrying a stream and then crossing an open field to the Wall. Our companions staying at the Slack House Farm about a mile away from "the Hill on the Wall" had to walk a comparable distance along a road to meet us at the Birdoswald Fort. Here, those who'd not yet done so filled in the fourth stamp for their HW Passport.

We spent a few minutes looking at the Birdoswald ruin, typically well-documented, and then headed west along a very flat course with only occasional wall structure sightings (a signal tower and some turret ruins). We reached the Centurion Inn in Walton, an old structure right at the edge of the road. Fred and Sue had told us about the English "pub roasts" on Sundays where full meals of roasted beef, lamb, or chicken could be had along with a brew. For some reason, this inn didn't provide that menu, but they had a good luncheon menu that we took advantage of in their smokeless enclosed terrace room.

Norm's leg pain seems to be getting worse, so he and Barbara have decided to cut their walk short and head for home tomorrow. We'll be sorry to lose them, and wish them well.



All but four of us (Connie, Lea, Bob, and I) were staying overnight at the Centurion Inn; we four called our innkeeper, Tony, at the Oakwood Park Hotel who came to pick us up. Oakwood Park is a grand 19th Century (1859) home of brick and red sandstone construction. It features high, ornate ceilings and very modern modular bathrooms, of the sort you'd expect on an overnight train compartment. Otherwise, our bedrooms were elegant and well-appointed. Tony is the 82-yr. old father of the

woman who owns the hotel and who serves as its cook.

Because of the short walking day, we had lots of time to shower, trim beards (in my case), re-arrange bag contents, and relax. Connie spent her time painting a water-color of a Wall-side scene that became a birthday card we signed and presented to Norm that evening at dinner (back at the Centurion Inn).

We had an hour to kill before heading for the Centurion Inn for dinner with the rest of our group, and we spent it in Tony's fully equipped bar offering draft beer and other libations. This tap room featured fine leather seating along the dark-walled, book-lined perimeter. But what was most enjoyable was not the room itself, but the conversation we had, over draft beer (Tetley Bitter) with Tony and his son-in-law, Terry and Terry's two border terriers (wonderful dogs!). Terry is a school facility manager (custodian in this country) who was amazingly thoughtful and well-spoken—like none I've ever talked with in the U.S. It was a pleasure exchanging ideas and information on topics ranging from the politics of "hoof-and-mouth" disease to comparative education practices in England and elsewhere.

Tony drove us to dinner with the rest of our group at the Centurion where we enjoyed yet another great evening meal together. The servers at this Inn were all from Eastern Europe (the bartender was a young woman from Riga, Latvia). This is a common practice here to fill in the labor gaps. It sounds like a successful implementation of the temporary worker proposals banded about in Congress earlier this year. The workers come to England for a several month stay, with all expenses paid, except their travel. They earn a modest amount of money (enough to make them want to come), learn more English, and then return to their home country. The program seems to work, according to the Centurion's owner, a young woman who, to save Tony the trip, drove the four of us back to the Oakwood on a fast, 3-mile white-knuckle (talking about my knuckles only) ride in a tiny car.



Our mileage for the day: **7.6 miles**, not including the additional 1-mile morning hike from hotel to the HWP.

18 Sept.

Today was another mostly flat walk, mainly through fields, with hardly any sign of the Wall. However, our map showed that at times we were within 100 m or less of the path of the Wall, and at other times as much as a kilometer away. Presumably, without actual Wall ruin to see, there is no need to create a trail across the middle of open fields that land-owners would likely resist having to maintain; so, we pretty much paralleled or walked along roads. It seems that the English Heritage trail system is not actually owned by the government, but rather leased as an easement with rights of public access from the local land-owners. As we passed the northern edge of Carlisle Airport, where the path of the wall (no ruin visible) is just tangent to the airport boundary, the contrast in civilizations was palpable.



Our goal today was the rather large town of Carlisle. But first, it was noon-time and we had to stop at the very inviting Stag Pub in the little village of Crosby on Eden. I enjoyed a beer and a delicious toasted cheese and tomato sandwich, my first in 20+ years! As it was a sunny day, we ate on the patio next to the road. This pub, like many (as well as inns) along the HWP, asked all patrons to remove their muddy boots at the door.

As we left the Stag Pub, we quickly come to the northern shore of the River Eden that snakes its way into Carlisle on its way to the Irish Sea. We were to see a lot more of the River Eden as we hiked through Carlisle and on toward Bowness-on-Solway. Within five

miles or so, we again came to River Eden, crossed over a pedestrian bridge to the south shore, and reached the Sands Sports Complex in the heart of the city. Here we rested, add our fifth passport stamp (one more to go!), and called our hotel for a pickup. Bob, Fred, and I decided, after asking one of the locals the distance and best walking route to our common inn for the night, the Etterby Country House, that we'd walk the distance, which we estimated to be less than 1.5 miles. It was a worthwhile walk!

The Etterby Country House is a large Victorian house not far from the north bank of the River Eden. It still has the marks from its prior (and recent) life as a youth hostel (spare furnishings and minimal landscaping) instead of those of a Victorian house, but Allen and Lynn, the proprietors are working on upgrading the place. Nevertheless, it's quite comfortable overall and Allen is a congenial transporter of our laden bodies. The house lacks a sitting room because the one large room on the ground floor is taken up as Allen's office.



Bob and I were assigned a room with two twin beds and barely enough room to move. Bob observed that it was so cramped that we would have to step out of the room if we wished to change our mind! The bathroom, at least, is quite large with plenty of space to dry washed underwear and sock liners.

Dinner was in the Best Western Hotel on the main street (the A7 Road) through Carlisle where we were served quite good meals. Joe ordered and enjoyed (part of) a bottle of a "pinotage" variety that he'd been looking for. The hotel, it turns out, was built on a part of the Wall (a fact revealed after construction).

Our mileage for the day: **11.5 miles**

19 Sept

Today looked good, weather-wise, and was our last full day of walking! We'd be at Bowness-on-Solway by mid-afternoon!

The day started with another full English breakfast with the porridge option for those who'd asked. One of the guests at breakfast was a man who works for English Heritage and is responsible for doing something with the "rights of way" for the public access paths, including the HWP. If you like hiking (and, of course, we all do!), then he's got a nice job!

We planned to start as two groups, today. Fred, Sue, Bob, and I wanted to start at the Sands Sports Complex where we left the HWP yesterday. The others in our group planned to take a shortcut that let them walk about ½ mile from the Etterby Country House, cross the River Eden and meet the HWP about 1.5 miles west of the Sands Complex. Allen

agreed to drive the smaller group to our starting point so we could say we did the WHOLE walk! As we started out over the first 1.5 miles, we four decided to look for all the features that the short-cutters would be sorry they missed. We found only: the Carlisle Castle, an invasive species (something from Japan) quarantine zone (Julie would have been very interested in this), and a fly fisherman happily at play. The other group also saw a fly fisherman, so our "unique" list was pared to two. The others seemed to have no regrets over their shortcut.

We followed the river for another couple of miles before moving inland across fields for another mile or two, finally stopping for a break in the center of the tiny village of Beaumont. The little bench we sat on in the center of the village was, according to the attached plaque, a gift from the mayor of Carlisle commemorating his visit about 15 years earlier. I wonder if Mayor Williams, for example, would grace with his presence a suburban village, say Reston, and leave a commemorative bench in the middle of town?

More field trekking until we came to a road along which we'd be hiking for the next 4-5 miles. As we passed through Dykesfield, we entered the tidal flood plane of the River Eden, now 0.5-1.0 km to our north. On the river (north) side of the road, a marsh extends to the River Eden, visible in the distance. Cows and some sheep were grazing and wandering along the road everywhere!

We'd been wondering how far ahead of the rest of our group we were. As we stopped at the vending machine canteen in Drumburgh, we found that they'd been ahead of us all morning! And, we had just dallied, waiting for them to catch up! Energized by tea and a pack lunch most of us had ordered, we set off for the final 4-5 miles to our destination.

The Wall was nowhere in evidence today, but we knew from the map that our lunch stop was adjacent to the site of one of the Wall forts and the actual (ruin-free) path of the wall was within a few hundred meters of our path for most of the day. A kilometer beyond the village of Glasson and about 3 km from the end of the HWP, we returned to the road, which was now skirting the marshes and mud-flats this side of the River Eden. We were soon in Port Carlisle where we stopped for liquid refreshment (and, in my case, a piece of rum-raisin cake, which turned out to be mostly chocolate) at the Hope and Anchor Inn. Someone in our group, probably Fred, told us that British pubs have a naming convention: Two items in the name, one abstract, the other material, as in "hope" and "anchor." We made a reservation to return at 6:30PM for dinner there; we liked the menu.



Three of our group (Joe, Fred, and Sue) were assigned to the Heskett House, a few doors away from the Hope and Anchor Inn. The rest of us were to stay at the Wallsend Guest House in Bowness-on-Solway, a few blocks from the end of the HWP.

We all continued up the road to the end of the trail where passports were stamped for the sixth and final time and a group picture was taken. Madeleine Kay of York, England, another walker who, with her husband, Terry, had finished the Wall walk about an hour before we did, was our photographer using Lea's camera.



On our way back to the Hope and Anchor pub for our final meal together (for this trip, at least), we stopped at the King's Arms Pub in Bowness to purchase our Wall Walk commemorative patch only to find that the King's Arms was no longer selling patches and they could now be purchased only through the mail (with payment in pounds). However, the King's Arms offered an alternative: a nice visored cap announcing "I Walked Hadrian's Wall" that would certainly serve as a conversation starter if nothing else. Charlie and I each bought one—black and white for him, and green and gold for me.



Our meal at the Hope and Anchor was a bit disappointing from a culinary standpoint, but the toasts and the conversation were great! We six who were returning to the Wallsend Guest House in Bowness (via a pickup by Patsy, our innkeeper, in her wagon) bid a fond goodbye to the "locals," Fred, Sue, and Joe who planned to take the early bus to Carlisle to begin their journey home after a day of sight-seeing in Manchester.

Our mileage for the day: **13.0 miles** for a total of **90.3 miles** along the HWP (not counting off-the-wall hiking to and from our hotels and restaurants).

20 Sept.

At the Wallsend Guest House, Patsy and Bill, the proprietors, serve up one of the best breakfasts we had on our trip, after which the Bonds, Bob, and I set out for a 1-hour walk along the moors—the marshy, rivulet-filled shore adjacent to the Firth of Solway into which the River Eden flows.



Upon returning to the Inn, we gathered our bags and walked up to the bus stop to await the 10:20



bus for Carlisle. Along the way as we approached Carlisle, I watched for signs of Group II marching along in the distance, especially as we passed through the villages of Burgh by Sands and Kirkcubright-on-

Eden, but no sightings were had! During most of the trip, Bob spent his time talking with Terry Kay, the retired librarian from York whom we met, along with his spouse Madeleine, yesterday. Perhaps Bob can remember the topics they worked over; among them were privacy issues and access to public documents as I recall.

Our bus arrived on time in Carlisle, right in the heart of the city. We bid goodbye to the Kays from York and begin our tour of the sights of Carlisle. We weren't encumbered by anything other than our back packs (except for me and my CPAP machine—I suffer from sleep apnea) because we'd carried our overnight clothing change and essential toiletries in our backpacks and left our big bags at the Etterby Country House to which we were returning tonight.

After walking through the beautiful city center, we spent 3 hours (including a light lunch) at the Carlisle Museum, where we enjoyed great exhibits describing the turbulent battle history of the City and, in TV video format, the devastating flood of the River Eden that took place a few years ago. We then went across the street for a somewhat shorter visit of the Carlisle Castle, where we learned much more about the major battles for Carlisle in the 16th and 17th Centuries. They were not nice times!

Upon leaving the Castle, we saw the need for rain gear, which we donned for the 1.5 mile walk to our hotel. Allen, the innkeeper, drove us to the Crown Pub where we enjoyed a very tasty and convivial supper of pub food (two dinners for 6 pounds!) and drink. We walked briskly home to our hotel, in the dark, in about 17 minutes. It was a perfect way to end our 8 glorious days in Hadrian's Wall Country!

The rest of our trip for our sub-group of four was a three-day stay in the Lake District of England, with more hiking and some strenuous climbing. But that's another story.