A Pilgrimage for Brian Haw
A Spiritual Journey of Relevance
From the Ruins of Barking Abbey to Canterbury Cathedral

By Lee D. Miller
Please listen to

“Where is the Love?”

By

The Black Eyed Peas

http://youtu.be/WpYeekQkAdc

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A Word about Pilgrimages from Canon Gordon Tarry

A pilgrimage is a journey or search of moral or spiritual significance. Typically, it is a journey to a shrine or other location of importance to a person's beliefs and faith. A person who makes such a journey is called a pilgrim.

A pilgrimage is also an inner journey. As a pilgrim travels, reflection can take place on life and any particular reasons the pilgrimage has been undertaken.

For many this space to think and reflect brings fresh purpose and meaning for their lives.

Barking Abbey, founded in 666, and its ruins, have been a place of pilgrimage for many years, and this continues today.
For

Since I've only met Brian Haw on two occasions in my life. Both meetings were very brief and I only exchanged but a handful of words with him. But he was still someone who had a great impact on me, for who he was and what he did. Firstly, I respected him greatly for the resilience and commitment he showed in standing for justice and for truth, no matter what the consequence may have been to himself, and secondly, for the courage he demonstrated when doing so. I feel that if every man, and every woman, showed the same strength and courage that Brian Haw demonstrated - to do the right thing and be true to their hearts, on a daily basis, no matter what – then the world would immediately be a different place: a place of peace and not war, a place of truth and not falsehood. I long for that world to emerge, as I’m sure do the predominant number of us, and I know that by simply living the way I have stated above I can help to make that desire a reality.

"You must be the change you want to see in the world" – Mahatma Gandhi

What else can you do? And that was my question, to myself, on 18th June 2011, the day I was made aware of Brian’s passing by the kind and courageous man who is David Icke (via his website). David opened a support fund (for Brian’s treatment in Germany) at the end of the previous year and I was pleased to contribute £9.28 to it – the last amount of “money” I had left in my bank account and all the money I had left in the world at that moment. I didn’t really care about the money, but the act felt like quite a symbolic thing to do at the time, and I’m glad that I did it... but what could I do now?

That evening I didn’t know, to be fair, but I had a feeling that a man like Brian Haw should be remembered, and that, I wanted to remember him. I’d recently returned to England, after being overseas, and was back at my Mum’s in Barking. I had no immediate plans for the future and, having a love of long distance walking (after walking the entire length of Hadrian’s Wall and Offa’s Dyke the year before), thought that maybe I should go on a long walk and the answer of what I should do next would come to me.

I feel there is something intrinsically special about walking, and especially about long distance walking through nature. It’s the best way to travel, I think, because of the different experiences you have and the people you encounter. You start to see the world with a different perspective and life somehow begins to take on a new meaning... you feel more at one with yourself and with the world around you. And there is something very liberating when you start to talk about distances in terms of “day’s walk”. It’s as if you reclaim something... some kind of freedom that you had lost somehow. Everywhere is suddenly within your reach.

I was staying at a place on the North York Moors once and I fancied visiting Scarborough (Why? Just to have a look!). So I decided to walk there from where I was. It took me three days (with two nights camping wild). It was a beautiful walk, across the moors and then along the coast, and when I got to Scarborough I walked through the town centre itself and came across an outdoor pursuit shop. In the window was a T-shirt with a fantastic message emblazoned on it. It read:
“No where’s too far to walk to… as long as you have the time!”

It made me smile because it was such a truth! But the greatest gifts that I find when walking are not just the beauty you can see or the experiences you may have... but the time you give to yourself, to be with yourself, and with your own thoughts. For it is in those moments that you may find your own truth and the reason for your being.

But where should I walk? The River Lea? The River Thames? Then I thought back to my walk along Offa’s Dyke and a wonderful friend I made during. My friend, Miriam, lived in Canterbury. Hang on, I thought... Canterbury! Why not walk to Canterbury on a pilgrimage. That’s what I can do. That’s how I can remember Brian!

So that’s it. That’s how this pilgrimage came about. But there is more that made it seem so much more appropriate and special. So much more “meant to be” in fact.

In the immediate days following that evening I started to plan my route. I was originally looking to begin my pilgrimage in Greenwich. I’ve always felt that Greenwich (and especially the hill in Greenwich Park) was a very special place, and it is my favourite place in London. But when I consulted the Ordinance Survey maps, something didn’t feel quite right about starting from there. Something didn’t feel completely appropriate. It was something that I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

So I studied the map of London before me, and then it hit me. Right in the top centre of the map was Barking! What was I thinking of?! I should start my pilgrimage from there... the place where I grew up! But not just at any place in Barking. The place that I, and many locally, regard as the most beautiful part... the ruins of Barking Abbey.

Barking Abbey was the first Benedictine Abbey built in England in 666 AD, by St. Erkenwald, and was once one of the richest and most powerful Abbeys in the land. It was home to William the Conqueror, after the Battle of Hastings, in 1066/67 (and while the Tower of London was being built), but was destroyed by Henry VIII during the dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539. St. Margaret’s Church survived and played host to the marriage of Captain James Cook to a Barking Lady named Elizabeth Batts on the Winter Solstice of 1762.

With my starting place decided, I began to plan the rest of my route. I wanted to avoid, as much as possible, busy roads and urbanisation, so I searched all the main footpaths to see how they linked up. I knew that I would have to walk along the Barking Road to reach the Isle of Dogs, in order to cross the Thames by the foot tunnel at Greenwich, and I was delighted to find that I could walk along the River Thames all the way to the River Darrent, which would in turn lead me to the ancient Pilgrims Way, connecting me to Canterbury.

This was set then, so all I had to decide was the time to leave. Because of the time of year, I thought it would be quite symbolic to leave on the day of the Summer Solstice, but when that day arrived it just didn’t feel right and I wasn’t feeling settled. So I waited, and in the meantime I decided to find out a bit more about Barking Abbey and about pilgrimages themselves. I visited St. Margaret’s Church and attempted to contact the presiding Canon, but he wasn’t there at the time.
Later, I phoned him and left a message, and on Friday 24th June, Canon Gordon Tarry returned my call and we proceeded to have a very pleasant conversation about the nature of pilgrimages and about the history of Barking Abbey itself. I discovered that I had been on the right track regarding my understanding of pilgrimages and the way in which I was approaching my own. The conversation really helped me. I finally felt settled and my thoughts felt focused. I was ready to go.

That evening I scanned the internet, to find out a bit more about Brian, and I came across an article written in the Evening Standard about him. It reported his death, and spoke about his life, and it said that Brian was an Evangelistic Christian. To be honest, I’d always heard that term used to describe certain kinds of Christians but I had never really understood exactly what it meant or felt an impulse to find out, so I took the opportunity to look it up and enlighten myself. This is what I found:

“The term "evangelical" comes from the Greek word that means "good news." Evangelism is sharing the good news of the salvation that is available through Jesus Christ. An evangelical, then, is a person dedicated to promoting the good news about Jesus Christ.”

The article then went on to speak about Brian’s background, his upbringing and his childhood, and I was amazed to discover that Brian was actually born... in Barking!*

What were the odds? I couldn’t believe it, but it made it feel like there was even more meaning to what I was doing. I was beginning my pilgrimage from a place, not only of great meaning and of spiritual significance to myself, but also a place which had direct connections to Brian and his own life. I knew in that moment that I was absolutely doing the right thing and I hoped that Brian was smiling down upon me. This felt very special.

So, on the morning of 25th June, 2011, my backpack was packed and my Mum gave me a lift to St. Margaret’s Church and ruins of Barking Abbey.

And my pilgrimage began......

*I’ve since learned that there was an error in the article that I read about Brian. He was in fact born in Woodford, but Barking was where he first lived and was brought up in his early years, before moving with his family to Whitstable, Kent, a few miles north of...... Canterbury.
Day 1 – Saturday 25th June, 2011

As I walked through the gates of the Curfew Tower, and into the grounds of St. Margaret’s Church, I turned to look behind me and saw my mum still sitting in her Land Rover, watching me until I was out of sight. I’ve always found it difficult to say goodbye to the ones I love, and this was no different. Sometimes you just don’t want to let go and no amount of hugs and kisses can ever compensate for that initial sense of loss for someone not being there.

It was a very cool morning, especially for the time of year, and I was pleased that I wouldn’t have to walk through the East End of London in uncomfortable conditions. I even sensed a bit of rain in the air. “Oh please God... not that... and not so soon!” I thought. I never feel like it’s a good idea to set off on a journey in bad weather, not unless you have to of course.

So, as I walked through the churchyard and approached the gates to the abbey itself, I turned one last time to wave and send my love to my Mum. She did the same to me and the car pulled away. I then turned and looked upon the ruins of Barking Abbey.

There is such a pleasant feeling in this place. You feel very at ease with a sense of peace. I surveyed the scene and then walked across to the top of the steps leading down to what was formerly the nave. I took my backpack off and sat down. This was the point I wished to start from, so I took a pen and a piece of paper from my backpack and began to write my affirmation.

I think there’s a lot of power in the written word. It’s almost as if it’s a means by which thoughts can manifest, in actuality, into the physical realm, and the energy from those thoughts reside within the ink and on the paper. I think that’s why I felt it was so important to write an affirmation, to not only focus my thoughts, but to harbour them in some way. And so I began...

Dear Gordon,

I am just writing this to affirm why I am doing this pilgrimage, and to thank you for taking the time to speak to me about it. I had planned to leave on the Solstice, but it didn’t feel right to on that day. I feel much more settled now that I have spoken to you and happy in the knowledge that I am approaching this the right way.

When I reach Canterbury I shall say a prayer of peace and love for all of your congregation and for the people of Barking, and I shall remember this parish by lighting a candle for it.

I am walking for the world in which I wish to live – a world which is not controlled by money, but is filled with peace, love and truth. I shall also walk in Remembrance of Brian Haw – a man who had the courage to stand for justice (in peace) no matter what the consequence it had to himself. I think that’s worth remembering.

May we all have that courage.

All my love,

Lee
I felt very well after I’d written my affirmation, by way of a letter to Canon Gordon Tarry, and I proceeded to go into St. Margaret’s Church and hand deliver it in the church office and to the church secretary. I then returned to my original spot and stood three quarters of the way up the steps, looking at the path ahead of me.

I was ready to begin my Pilgrimage, my thoughts were focused and I repeated the reason for it – for the world I wished to live in, a world which is not controlled by money, but is filled with peace, love and truth... and in remembrance of a great man. A man that had the courage to stand for justice, no matter what the consequences may have been to himself, a man who was called... Brian Haw.

I said a prayer, and then I walked down the steps and forward along the nave. When I reached the gate leading out of the ruins I turned to take one last look at the abbey.

“What a beautiful place,” I thought, and turned to continue.

As I walked out of the parish of Barking, I crossed the River Roding and then the busy A406 before entering the Barking Road. My thoughts had started to run quite wild, and not about anything in particular, just random things. At one point I thought, “I should really be focusing on thinking about this Pilgrimage and what it’s about,” and then I gave myself a “chill pill” and decided that there’ll be plenty of time for that.

So I allowed my thoughts to go where they wished. It was quite quiet along the Barking Road that morning and I was glad. The world was giving me the feeling that it was still waking up, and as it was a Saturday, it must have enjoyed a lie in! I continued along the road (through the residential areas and by the shopping arcades) all the way along to East Ham and onto West Ham, whereupon I stopped just opposite Priory Road, with a view of the Boleyn Ground, home to West Ham United FC.

I always loved looking at my club. It always gave me a sense of nostalgia and inspiration. As I stood there I recalled the countless times I’d walked the same path, on a pilgrimage to support my team. I remembered some of the best moments I’d had at Upton Park, and one still remains one of the best moments of my life – 1998 FA Cup Quarter-Final against Arsenal. John Hartson scored in the dying minutes to level and take the game into extra-time. What a moment! I looked to the heavens and thanked God! And then I remembered one of the worst moments... same game, and after the end of extra-time, Abou walking down the pitch to take his penalty.

You’ll notice I said “Abou walking to take his penalty,” and not him actually taking it. That’s because everyone, to a man, knew that he was going to miss. Not because he was a bad player or anything, but there was just this sense that he didn’t have the right temperament. Whispers of “Not Abou,” echoed around the stadium. We knew we were out... and then he missed, and we were.

“It’s a funny old game,” I thought as I stood there, but then I thought football could best be described as a strange one. It really seems to reflect the state of
society in so many ways, the good and the bad, and it really is an amazing form of human expression – from playing it, to supporting it, to observing it, to talking about it. It unites and it divides in equal measure. It demonstrates beauty and is plain ugly.

Some say that football stadiums are like cathedrals, and I can concur with that observation. The coming together of a mass of people, the focus of energy, the dedication and... the standing to sing in unison! It’s also regularly said that a club’s congregation... I mean supporters!... are like their twelfth man and it is clear that there is an exchange of energy somewhere because of the focus of thought (prayer!).

And then I thought about the amount of time people invested in thinking about football and I wondered how different the world might be if they chose to think about other things... like the issues that really mattered... the things that Brian Haw spent his life protesting about.

It’s a big escapism (football) and I think that so many people invest their time thinking about it so that they don’t have to think about the rest of the nonsense that surrounds and controls their lives. I know, at times, that it has been true of me.

I walked on, and immediately came to the statue of another Barking man who had honour, integrity and respect. The late, great... Bobby Moore. He wasn’t just an exceptional footballer, he was an exceptional gentleman. I paid my respects and continued.

As I carried on, and just past Plaistow, I noticed a very peculiar thing heading towards me on the pavement. What is that? Some kind of... tricycle! Some bloke was riding a tricycle, “Blimey, you don’t see that very often,” I thought. And then as the bloke rode towards me, I couldn’t believe it... was it? Yeah it was... Terry!

“Lee!!!” exclaimed the bloke (who turned out to be Terry) “How are you?”

“Good mate... and you?” I replied, with a big smile on my face.

“Yeah alright... are you doing the football again?” Terry immediately asked.

In a former life I worked as a Community Development Officer/Manager for Leyton Orient, and during my time there I set up a pan-disability football league – The Leyton League - which was for adults with learning disabilities in East London. It wasn’t my job to do so, and I didn’t accept any payment for the extra hours I put in to organise and run it (even though I was offered), but I just felt like it was something that I wanted to do, something that I felt needed to be done and something that I had the opportunity (and power) to make happen.

It was a free event, with training once a week and a league tournament once a month. Terry was an adorable fellow from one of the teams that used to attend. I hadn’t seen him since the last session I ever took at Orient, over two years before.

“No mate, I don’t do that anymore. Do you still go?” I asked.

“No, it finished about a year ago. We don’t go there anymore,” Terry said, with a tinge of sadness in his voice.
“I’m sorry to hear that,” I replied.

And I really was. At least it lasted for a year or so after I left. At least that was something. I know that there are people out there who quite like the idea that a project may fail because they’re not part of it anymore, maybe it makes them feel needed in some way, but not me. As far as I’m concerned, successful project management means that you build something, to such an extent that it no longer needs your energy input for its continued success, to a point where the project lives off of the energy of its own participants, and so that it may then take on a life of its own.

But the problem is the continuous struggle for funding, whereby you can end up spending most of your working hours sitting at a computer screen, searching, completing, justifying, analysing and jumping through some of the most ludicrous bureaucratic hoops, just to get a few pounds of funding and instead of doing what you’re really there for - being on the ground and doing something positive in the physical realm in order to make the world a better place.

Maybe that’s what had happened at Orient - there wasn’t anyone to do the fund raising. And isn’t that the saddest reflection of the state of our world... the fact that everything appears, fundamentally, to come down to the pursuit of money.

That’s got to change. It’s nonsense!

“Where are you going?” Terry then asked, looking at my backpack.

“I’m walking to Canterbury on a pilgrimage, would you believe?” I replied.

“Canterbury, that’s a long way,” he said, with a slightly confused expression.

“Yeah, I like walking mate. How is everyone from the Bow team?” I said, quickly changing the subject.

“Alright,” Terry replied and I went onto ask how some of the team members were and Terry let me know.

“Say hello to everyone for me,” I said.

“Ok Lee, I’ve got to go now. Good to see you,” Terry responded before departing.

“And you mate,” I replied.

With that, Terry “tri-cycled” off into the distance and I stood and remembered all the friends I had made at The Leyton League and the experiences I’d had. They were all my friends (at The Leyton League), they were not clients or service users, they were my friends, and some of the best friends I have ever made.

But why did I just bump into Terry, here, in this moment and after all that time? I didn’t know, but I did know that it was so good to see him and remember those times and people.

The thing that I find about people who are termed to have a “learning disability” is that, for me, they are the most real and genuine people alive on this planet today. In every moment they are being true to themselves. If they are in a horrible mood, then they’re in a horrible mood; and if they’re being loving, then their love is so pure
and it comes straight from their heart. There is never anything hidden with them and they always express their truth, no matter what, and in every moment. They don’t care what people think of them; they just are who they are, and they do what they do.

Learning “disabilities” my arse! They have abilities that we can all learn from and they have so much to teach us. Imagine a world where everyone was true to themselves and did what they felt was right in their hearts, in every given moment, and no matter what the consequences may be to themselves. Imagine a world where everyone did that, irrespective of what anyone else thought, and had the strength to take a stand for who they were and what they believed in. Imagine a world where all people showed that courage. Imagine a world where all people demonstrated the same courage displayed by... Brian Haw.

I was thinking all this as I continued down the remainder of the Barking Road and until I passed another church which was dedicated to St. Margaret. I stopped once more to take in the sight, as I found it so very peculiar. The frontage of the brick built Catholic Church incorporated a huge window which took the form of a pentagram.

“Why is a Pagan symbol being so blatantly displayed on a Christian building?” I thought to myself.

To be honest, I had noticed it at other times in my life, but it was just that, on this day, I found it to be even more interesting.

“From a Christian perspective, maybe it has something to do with Adam and the Apple,” I wondered “Whenever you slice an apple across the middle you find a pentagram... that’s why the apple is sacred to Pagans after all,” I continued to think.

To Pagans, a pentagram is symbolic of the five elements – Earth, Air, Water, Fire and Spirit - and so I then felt curious to know how many Christians actually knew that. Whatever the reason for this Pentagram being there though, it did look impressive, and it certainly always caught my eye.

I headed on to Canning Town, and then crossed the A13, before making my way towards the Isle of Dogs and getting my first complete glimpses of the financial centre which is Canary Wharf. Then something suddenly struck me.

My Pilgrimage was also about the world I wished to live in - a world that was not controlled by money - and here I was, walking adjacent to the British “cathedral” of money! I honestly hadn’t thought of that before (when I was planning my route). The Isle of Dogs was just a means by which to get to the Greenwich foot tunnel, and the Greenwich foot tunnel was just a means to get across the River Thames on foot. The symbolism of this hadn’t registered with me... until now.

I immediately thought “Now this is the place to focus,” and so I did. All the way along, from my crossing of the River Lea to my approach of Island Gardens, I kept my eyes (and my attention) on the sky-scrapers which made up the Canary Wharf
complex of buildings, and all the while I sent out my thoughts for the world in which I wished to live... a world which is not controlled by money.

“Come on then... your control is going to be broken, you will not succeed in controlling us any longer. Humanity is standing up and we shall not surrender. My heart is more powerful than anything you have ever encountered and I shall prevail. You will be toppled... you’re going down.”

Yep... that’s what I was thinking, all the way along. I don’t know what difference I made to the world, but I felt very “in the zone” as we like to say in sport. I was facing up, I was squaring up... I was standing up. At least that’s how it felt in my head and in my heart.

There’s a point, as you walk along that stretch of the Island (of Dogs), where you cross one of the entrances to the former docks and you see the building which is named (No.1) Canary Wharf in between the twin towers of another two buildings (occupied by banks), and if you then turn 180 degrees you see the Millennium Dome, across the water of the River Thames, exactly opposite. Whenever I travel this way, to go to Greenwich, I always look both ways as I cross this point because the alignment fascinates me and I always note what seems to me to be a “pyramid” at the peak of the complex.

On this day, my point of viewing reminded me of when I was in Washington DC in 1994. When I was 19 I travelled right around America, through 28 states (I really did encompass it and discovered that the United States of America is not really a single country at all, but rather a collection of smaller countries), and at the end of my trip I visited the Washington Monument.

I remembered that at the bottom of the Washington Monument there was an information board explaining the history behind the building of it. It explained that there was a competition for the design of a monument to commemorate George Washington and there were a handful of design entries shown. What I couldn’t believe, at the time, was why on earth the monstrosity before me had been chosen when I thought there were a couple of other entries that looked quite aesthetic and pleasing to the eye. I didn’t understand.

I then chose to go up the Monument and have a look out from the top, so I paid my entrance fee and entered the lift to ascend. As the lift was going up, I had the strangest feeling... the strangest intuition in fact. I felt like I was going up the inside of a huge cock! I swear, it’s the truth, and I have to say that I felt extremely uncomfortable. When I got to the top I had a look out of the viewing window and saw down before me the long reflecting pool and, in the distance, Capitol Hill.

I remembered thinking how much it (the US Capitol Building) reminded me of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, but then I just felt so uncomfortable that I wanted to come down. That was even stranger because I usually love (so much) to be up in high places and taking in views. I always seem to linger longer than I should in places like that because of some kind of childish excitement.
The thing is, since those days, I’ve learnt that the Washington Monument is in fact an obelisk, like many used to commemorate the war dead around the world, and is an esoteric symbol of masculine energy. And so it literally is a big cock! I’ve also learnt that domes represent feminine energy in esoteric symbolism, and so, as I stood there, I thought how much No.1 Canary Wharf looked like an obelisk (and if it were then it’d be the biggest one in the world), then I turned around again to see the O2, the Millennium Dome – the biggest dome in the world!

Was this by esoteric design or just a co-incidence? I didn’t know the definitive answer, but I do think it’s interesting and very strange. But what I absolutely did know was that there was no justifiable reason for spending £1 billion – yes ONE BILLION POUNDS! - on a big dome... and then to leave it empty for a number of years! I looked at the Dome and I thought that the people that govern us are mental cases! I then thought that that was an observation that Brian would probably agree with... and I smiled to myself.

Now, it was just at this point, and just as I left that place to head on to Island Gardens, that I began to realise that I may have a problem. My heels were starting to feel a bit sore and were sticking to the inner sole of my shoe...

The day before I left, I was up in my mum’s loft and I came across the pair of shoes I was given to work in when I was on a Kibbutz, in Israel, during 1995. They were made in Israel and were the shoes I’d travelled around the Middle East in (after I finished my 3 month’s as a Kibbutz volunteer). I was wearing them when I travelled to the Sea of Galilee, Jerusalem, the Milk Grotto in Bethlehem and I was even wearing them when I climbed to the summit of Mount Sinai.

Well, in that moment I had an attack of nostalgia and sentimentality, and I thought it would be quite appropriate to do the pilgrimage while wearing them to Canterbury. In fact, at the time I thought it was a fantastic idea! They were quite worn, but I thought they’d be ok if I put a new inner sole in them. So I found a pair of "not so old" trainers and attempted to pull out the inner sole in order to transplant them to the work shoes for greater comfort. Unfortunately, they both ripped at the heel (where they were glued), but I persevered and managed to transfer them to my old work shoes, sticking them in with double sided sticky tape.

Ok, I know what some people might be thinking right now – “What a wally,” right? If you are, I understand that sentiment, I really do, but to be fair they felt great! As I walked up and down in them - to test them out - I had a picture in my head of the scene in “Father of the Bride” when Steve Martin goes up into his attic, and after finding his 1970’s tuxedo, he tries it on and declares joyously - while looking at himself wearing the tight and ill-fitting suit in the mirror – “... it still fits!”

If only I had taken heed from that thought!
... I always knew that the first day of walking would be the hardest and longest because I would be walking through the city (on tarmac and pavement) and I had to get clear of suburbia in order to find a safe and appropriate spot to camp wild.

Although it had been very cool during the morning, now it had past midday the temperature had started to skyrocket! By the time I was at Island Gardens, my feet had become quite hot and sweaty, and this had added to the sensation of my heels not feeling quite right. I had the realisation that this might actually be quite serious.

I decided to stop for lunch, at a picnic table in the gardens by the Greenwich foot tunnel, and I took the opportunity to have a good look at my feet. My heels were very red, but not yet blistering and I also noticed that the bones on both the balls of my feet also felt quite sore. The shoes didn’t seem to be supporting my feet very well and even though the inner soles felt good at first, the very slight blemish in the padding under heel was rubbing.

To add, the fabric which was stuck (by the double sided sticky tape) to the ripped padding of my inner-soles had worn loose, so exposing the sticky tape to the heel of my sock. This consequently allowed the “stickiness” to penetrated the thin “secret socks” I was wearing, meaning that with every step the heels of my feet had not only been rubbing on the ever so slight blemish of the ripped padding, but were also being stuck to the padding, then ripped off, then stuck once more (etcetera) during the continuous action of walking. So, by the time I had reached Island Gardens, you can understand the reason for the redness of my heels!

Ok, I’m going to have to digress slightly, just to sort this “foot business” out once and for all, because (looking back) it most definitely appears to me like a muppet decision that I made while “modernising” my choice of footwear, and because I know that there is also a high probability that there are some people reading this who may be working their way through their entire vocabulary of rudimentary insults for me, and have probably just arrived at “You plonker!” for not taking the subject of “foot care” seriously enough. They could be right, of course, but for the record, I know that... they’re wrong!

You see, I have hiked all around the world (long distance and short) in all types of terrains and environments, from jungles to deserts, from wetlands to mountains, and in all that time, and in all those experiences, I have never (EVER) had a serious problem with my feet! Ok, the odd blister around my little toe and the occasional one on the back of my heel, but nothing too dramatic and nothing to cause any kind of pain that I couldn’t ignore. And that is why, during the summer months, I walk with “thin” secret socks. They let my feet breathe and if they get wet, then they’re able to dry out very quickly. I re-iterate – I’ve never had a problem!

What’s that I hear? Gasp from the members of the “Serious Hiking Association” whose advice would officially be:

“You should wear thick socks... and plenty of them!”
Ok, I understand that sentiment, and it’s a fair comment, but in the words of my sadly passed, yet still, great Aunt June - a proper Barking Lady if there ever was one and someone who always said things exactly as they were:

“You do it your way... and I’ll do it mine. Alright!?" - I love that phrase!

So (digression over), here I was, two hours into my Pilgrimage, sitting at a picnic table in Island Gardens, inspecting my feet and thinking “Oh bugger!”

I repaired the problem, with the inner-sole, as best I could (pulling the fabric back over the heel of the padding and sticking it underneath this time) and tended to my feet by pouring water over them, drying them with a clean tissue and then applying some Savalon. After that, I washed my hands (hey... I’m not a barbarian!) and proceeded to have lunch.

It was beautiful sitting there, in the shade, looking at the picturesque view across the Thames towards Greenwich. It’s such a charming scene and when you look out across the water (to the old naval college buildings and beyond to the hill in Greenwich Park) everything always appears to be perfect with the world. At least that’s how I feel. You could lose hours there, just watching the world go by. I have great affection for places like that... but not today, I had to keep moving!

The weather was suddenly amazing and we were now in proper summer. The only drawback now was that I thought maybe it was a touch too hot (give me a break, I’m English, it’s what we do!). At least my feet felt ok (I thought!) and I was glad that I had caught them just in time and before any real damage had been done.

I finished lunch, put on my backpack, and proceeded to cross the River Thames by journeying down the steps of the Greenwich foot tunnel to a depth of 50ft beneath the river bed. I remembered as a boy being first brought along this way, by my Dad (what an adventure!), and running along the first part of the tunnel and pretending I was in one of the space fighters being launched from the 1970’s version of Battle Star Galactica! It really has that feel about it, and I have to admit, even to this day, and when no one is looking... I still do it!!!

Then I remembered climbing up the stairs on the other side to be greeted by the wonderful and inspiring sight that is the Cutty Sark (what a beautiful ship!). When I exited on this day, however, that beautiful ship was for the most part dismantled and hidden due to the on-going restoration work, I guess, so that it would be in tip-top shape and ready for the London Olympics. It was a shame, at least for me on that day.

“Hello Cutty Sark,” I said in my head as I passed.

As I walked by, after traversing the Victorian tunnel, I had a thought to check in the tourist office in order to make sure of my route along the Thames Pathway. It was lucky that I did so, because they informed me that there was a partial closure to the path and that there was a marked diversion in place.
I continued to walk by the side of the River Thames, passing pubs full of tourists enjoying the sunshine on their Saturday afternoon, and tried to follow the diversion as best I could. The signage was, to be frank, quite terrible in places and I wasted a little bit of time trying to follow them while consulting my map. I decided that this was becoming quite ridiculous and I resolved to walking directly across North Greenwich, cutting out the path around the Millennium Dome, and re-joining the Thames on the other side of the inland “peninsular”.

There was a cycle route heading in that direction, so I followed it and it led me across the busy A102 by a footbridge. After an initial reprieve, my feet had started to feel troublesome again and I was pleased to think that this route would actually save me a mile or so. It was feeling terribly hot in the sun and I was beginning to perspire quite heavily. Great Britain was now in the midst of a heat wave!

“Well, it could be worse,” I thought “Better than rain,” I guessed, and then realised that I was being ever so English again!

As I continued onwards (and in order to re-join the Thames) I walked through an estate of low rise “new builds”. They were of exactly the same kind of construction which now, in my opinion, “littered” Barking. All the so called advancements in our civilisation, all the new investment and all the architectural schools... and this is what they come up with – cheap lego houses! Multi-coloured boxes! It’s everywhere! One of these structures in Barking actually won a European architectural award! The question I asked myself in that moment was - “Who’s judging?!”

I thought about a seminar I attended in Hungary a couple of years before, whereby I actually had the opportunity to walk around and see the beautiful City of Budapest. When I was there, it was clear that there was much investment (in the city) going on, as new buildings were being erected in many places and some of the main streets were being completely refurbished. What struck me, at the time, was how aesthetic all these new buildings were and how they were “in keeping” with what already existed.

Budapest is such a beautiful city. At every turn I found myself stopping and looking (with awe sometimes) at the truly inspirational architecture. To behold the buildings raised my spirits and lifted my soul, and I thought that that’s what should be the measurement of truly good architecture... how much it inspired and touched you.

And as I walked through the north part of Greenwich I looked upon these “new builds” with a feeling of resentment.

“How can my beautiful country be turned into this!” I thought.

It all looked tidy enough, but that’s the best I could say for it. There was no character, no personality, no feeling of life and most definitely... no inspiration! Not for me, anyway. To me, they were the equivalent of a flat packed chipboard chest of drawers, compared to a cabinet made from solid oak and by a master craftsman.

Ok, there may very well be people out there who think that these kind of
structures are fantastic to look at (and even to live in). In fact, I’m sure there are, but all I can say to those people is... where’s your imagination?!?

I exited the estate (or complex) by the Greenwich Ecology Park, and by some other “new builds” that I thought looked quite exceptional in their design, and quite frankly, I wouldn’t have minded living in myself. They were very modern looking, but also had the feel of the natural environment about them and so fitted quite well into the landscape within the immediate vicinity of an ecological park. It’s all subjective, I guess, but I thought, “Why can’t there be more new buildings with this kind of imagination? If there were, I wouldn’t be as bothered!”

My attention then switched back to my feet. They were actually becoming quite painful. I could feel that blisters had begun to form on the balls of my heels and, as a way of compensating, I had been walking with an action that had been distributing more of my weight around the other areas of my feet (specifically along the sides and more to the front). The thing was, owing to the poor quality of my foot wear, these areas had also begun to become enflamed and were starting to feel sore too.

“I’m in trouble man, I’m in real trouble,” I thought to myself. I stopped at the ecological park building and used the toilet facilities to freshen up. Because I had been walking for most of the day (thus far along the streets and by the traffic) I had started to feel quite suffocated by all the fumes. My exposed skin even felt quite dirty, as if it had the residue of pollution on it. I was glad to have a quick wash and felt quite energised afterwards, but I was also extremely concerned at the state of my feet. No doubt about it, they were hurting, and I couldn’t see that they were going to get any better.

I went back outside, and sat on a bench, to rest and to examine them again. They really weren’t looking good either. The soles looked very pink in places and red in others, and I could see that fluid had formed underneath the skin on the bottom of my heels. I was starting to feel a lot of discomfort and I knew now that this was going to be a serious problem. I was really angry with myself.

“Well done Lee... you fucking idiot!” I thought to myself “You’ve ruined this now, haven’t ya... bloody ruined it! If it’s like this now what’s it gonna be like later? Aye? What’s it gonna be like? You fucking prick! Yeah right, now there’s a good idea mate... wear your old Kibbutz work shoes all the way to Canterbury! Yeah, fucking top drawer mate, great idea, well done! Fucking twat! What a gonad!” I really gave myself a bollocking. I realised that I was in so much trouble.

I continued to give myself a talking to, but decided that it would be ok and that all I really needed to do was put some extra padding in my shoes. Improvising, I thought that some card board would do the trick. So I put my shoes back on and carried on walking with one eye out for the salvation of a cardboard box!

Now the thing is, as I’ve grown up in London, I’ve noted that there is always a copious amount of rubbish littering the streets. That being so, I thought I would quite easily come by an appropriate piece of “clean” cardboard that would suffice
and adequately be adaptable to a new life in the soles of my shoes... but... could I bollocks!

It was amazing, all the way along the entire length of the pathway, by the Thames, from where I was to the Woolwich Ferry, I didn’t come across hardly any litter of the kind that I could reasonably use and apply! I walked past numerous public areas and still nothing. And meanwhile it was getting hotter and hotter, and my feet were “ripping” into more and more pieces. The pain was starting to become quite intense.

It was during this section, and before I reached the Thames Barrier, that I began to think to myself “If Brian Haw can endure 10 years of his life in Parliament Square, in all weathers and for what he believed in, then you can endure this. It’s not a problem, keep walking.” Every step I took was starting to become excruciating, and because the whole of the both of my feet were now suffering, there was no way I could compensate anymore.

I stopped every couple of hundred yards to take a short reprieve and to turn to take a look back at the view from whence I had come (back along the river and to the skyline that was created by the Millennium Dome and Canary Wharf). For me, it really was a mesmerising scene and I loved looking back upon it. The sky was so blue all around, and the sun reflected off of the glass of the buildings and sparkled off of the river. The grey and brown buildings, indiscriminately aligning the sides of the river, and the haphazard boats dotted upon it, helped to create a strangely captivating scene. It certainly was helping to take my mind off of the discomfort I was experiencing, and it did look beautiful, in a modern and unnatural kind of way.

It was the pain each time my heels took my weight which was the real problem though, and I knew that if I didn’t get the situation remedied in some way, then that pain was only going to get worse.

“If Brian Haw can endure 10 years in Parliament Square, in all weathers, for what he believed in, then you can endure this!”

I continued to rally myself in order to keep myself going. In fact, it was getting to a point where the only thoughts I was having were connected to my feet... and Brian Haw!

Just as I passed Woolwich Ferry I finally came across some usable cardboard – it was a used (and surprisingly clean!) 7 inch pizza box. I found a bench, in a little park along the way, and began to attend to my feet once more. My God, the bliss when I took my shoes off of my feet and the weight was finally removed from them! It was approaching the latter part of the afternoon and was still very hot, but it was nice to sit there and take in a little bit of a breeze. It’s always cooler sitting by a river.

I took the box and found my Swiss Army knife (or I should more accurately describe it as my “multi-purpose” knife made by “High-gear”), then I began to shape the box accordingly. I figured two layers should be enough, so I doubled the card board over and shaped the heels appropriately. I slotted the inner-soles in between the cardboard, and then I placed them back in the shoes and... Roberts your father’s
brother... we had lift-off!

I noticed that I got a number of strange looks, from people passing by, as I was doing this. What was their problem? Had they never seen a man cutting up a pizza box, carefully shaping it and placing it in his shoes before? I jest, because it was understandable, but I didn’t care and continued to put my shoes back on and proceeded to try them out.

“Top drawer!” I thought, as I took some strides up and down. They really appeared to make a difference. It was still painful (but pretty bearable) so I was quite happy and ready to move on again. I continued to have the thoughts about Brian and felt that as long as I could see the day through, then I could think about sorting out the shoe situation tomorrow.

I started to formulate a plan and thought that as soon as I made it to Dartford I could phone my mum and, seeing as Barking was only 20 minutes away from Dartford being just down the A13 and across the Dartford Bridge, it wouldn’t be that much of a drama for her to bring me my hiking shoes so that I could continue. There was no way I could carry on with what I was presently wearing and the exchange wouldn’t take me off course in any way. It was a shame that I wasn’t going to be able to go all the way to Canterbury in my “Holy Land” work shoes, but I guessed this must have been happening for a reason. So much for sentiment though!

Just after you pass the Woolwich Ferry you walk through a place called Woolwich Arsenal (or the Royal Arsenal Woolwich - depending upon how posh you think you are!). It’s a very interesting place and was once a site of armament manufacture, of ammunition proofing and of explosive research for the British Army.

Most of it is now being used for residential purposes, but as I reached there, I was struck, for the second time that day, by the symbolic nature (to my pilgrimage) of something I was passing, and although already knowing it was there, I hadn’t thought about it during the planning of my route. This was a place where bombs had been made - bombs that had gone around the world causing so much damage and destruction - bombs that killed, bombs that maimed, bombs that showed no discretion and no compassion, bombs (of the like) that Brian Haw had spent the best part his life protesting against.

To be honest, I’d like to say that in that moment of realisation I sent love out to the world and said a prayer for peace... but I didn’t. I just stood there, looking upon the guns that still remained, and thought, “What’s the point? What’s the point in firing a gun at someone? What utter fucking nonsense.” I didn’t know what else to think, to be fair, just that.

I turned to continue and thought about another historical connection that Woolwich Arsenal had, and you guessed it, its football related again I’m afraid! I thought about Arsenal Football Club, which originated from this place before moving to North London and dropping the “Woolwich” from its name. It’s a peculiar history with Arsenal, and another one that holds a strange resonance with me for everyday
The season after Arsenal moved across the water (1914/15) they finished 5th in the English Second Division yet “somehow” managed to get “elected” into the English First Division, in the season following the First World War, when the Football League re-commenced. You’ll note that I said “elected” and not “promoted”, for to be “promoted” would indicate that this happened by “sporting” achievement and fair play. This was not the case, however. What happened had less to do with sport, and more to do with “politicking” and no doubt the exchange of “money”.

But it doesn’t end there...

Arsenal FC also hold’s an even more peculiar record of never have being relegated from the First Division (now the Premiership) in all of its history! It is, in fact, the only football club which can boast of such a thing! So basically, after gaining entry to the top flight of English football by unsporting means, Arsenal has never left!

I was thinking about this as I continued and I thought “What’s the moral of this story?” The only thing I could come up with was that “Sometimes in life, cheaters do prosper!!!”, but I really wasn’t happy with that thought. It’s not right and it’s not the world I wanted to live in.

In fact, it was the very thing (I realised in that moment) that I’d spent most of my life (in my own way) trying to remedy and eradicate, from working on the estates with young people to just trying to treat people decently and fairly in my everyday life. I hate cheating, and I hate even more the fact that there are some people who appear to benefit greatly from being underhand. I don’t know what the answer is, but I do know...

That it’s not right, it’s not fair and it has to stop!!!

I’d actually got myself quite worked up, and then I wondered to myself, “Why have you just got so wound up by the thought of cheaters and liars, but five minutes earlier you were thinking about bombs and destruction (and ultimately of their consequence which is “killing”) yet you didn’t have the same kind of reaction?”

It was an interesting question to pose to myself, and I took a few moments to ponder it. I struggled for an answer, I have to be honest. I didn't know with absolution. I have, unfortunately, experienced the effects of a bomb, but not its power of destruction first hand (and I hope I never do). I have, however, experienced the sense of injustice from “foul play” and “dishonesty”, and so I thought that maybe this was the answer to my question – the sense of emotional attachment I had to the thought.

I was reasonably happy with the explanation that I had given to myself, but was also consciously aware that the destruction and the indiscriminate killing caused by a
bomb must be amongst the most unjust acts known to the human race. It’s sickening. And in that thought, maybe I had just stumbled across another explanation for the apathy I felt whilst looking at the guns... maybe they were just too insane to fully contemplate.

I continued walking on, in bearable intense pain (with the cardboard doing a reasonably good job at softening the impact of my heel, on the pavement, as I stepped) until I reached a part of the Thames Path that was at a point almost directly opposite to Barking on the other side of the water. It was quite a peaceful area, so I decided that this would be a good time to take another break and I found a spot by the river, in the shade and under some trees. I sat down, taking my shoes off once more. What a relief!

As I looked across the river, I could see some of the taller buildings in Barking and I was amazed to see how close the town was to the Thames. It was only a mile or so away, and yet in all my time growing up there, the Thames played no real part in my life. It’s absurd really, only living a short distance from one of the biggest rivers in England and rarely seeing it, never thinking of it and not even realising how close it actually was. It may as well not have even been there, so little relevance had it played in my “day to day” life growing up.

It wasn’t always like that in Barking, and I recalled that Barking was once one of the biggest fishing ports in England (and as recently as just a century and a half ago). I thought back to how the world used to be back then, when rivers were the main focus of human societies and the life blood of civilisations in many ways. I looked further down river and saw the Barking Barrier, standing tall, further along.

The Barrier is a flood defence for the River Roding and I wondered what the scene would have looked like over a hundred years ago. I thought that if I had lived in the days of my Great Nan, then the river would have played a bigger role in my life, either via work in the great Docks of London, or through what was left of the fishing fleet at Barking. I then remembered an amusing incident that had happened to me in Cornwall, a couple of years before, and I giggled to myself at the memory...

For a brief period in 2008/2009 I lived in Cornwall and had gotten involved in the indigenous sport of Cornish Pilot Boat “Gig” Racing. It’s a fantastic rowing sport, with many of the seaside communities in Cornwall having their own team and boathouse. Throughout the summer months, and all around Cornwall, Gig Regattas are held almost every weekend and they are fabulous events. It’s an amazing sport, and one which literally brings the whole community together, because all age groups participate, from youth level to that of veterans. Not only that, but it is also a means by which a very Cornish tradition has been kept alive.

Gig “Pilot Boat” racing originates from the days when the sea was the main means of trade and transport around the world, and in a time when local knowledge of the hazardous shoreline was essential. As the ships approached port they required
a “pilot” to enable them a safe passage, and this is where the tradition of Gig boats developed from.

They are hardy boats, built for speed, and manned by six oarsmen and a cox. As a ship came into view of an anchorage, gangs of men (assigned to their own boat) would race out to rendezvous with the ship. The first pilot reaching the deck of a ship gained the commission and the right to pilot the ship into harbour – and so earning the money. It was big business... and the best crew won!

Anyway, on this particular Saturday, we didn’t have a regatta and so a few of us went out to “train” in the Gig boat. The truth was, although we did train for a while, the real reason for our voyage was to spend the afternoon fishing out past the headland (naughty, naughty... slap on the wrist!).

As everyone cast their lines overboard (I borrowed my rod off of one of the lads) Steino (a middle-aged Cornish fisherman who was the cox and one of my very good friends) said to me:

“You ever fished before, Lee?”

“Yeah, a bit on a lake, but never at sea,” I replied.

And this was the cue for Steino to start having a proper dig at me!!!

“Ah, you bloody Londoners, you ain’t got a clue have you, you can’t fish, here put the rod down and just watch everyone else cos your wasting your time,” he said in his Cornish accent, while poking fun at me.

“Well, funny you should say that Steino, cos Barking, where I’m from, used to be the biggest fishing port in England. Fishing’s in me blood, mate,” I said as a way of defending myself and deflecting the banter.

Oh, you should have heard the derision!

“Ah shut up, you expect me to believe that you Cockney twat...” Steino continued and proceeded to slate me, along with the enthusiastic assistance of the rest of the lads!

“I’m telling you, it’s true mate, I’ll show you, you bunch of Cornish “merchant bankers”!” I said, while metaphorically sticking my chest out!

“Fishing’s in your blood? Do me a favour you Cockney prick! I bet you don’t catch a fish today,” he said, half in jest and half in prophecy.

And he was right... I didn’t!!! But nor did anyone else for that matter, except for Steino of course, who annoyingly caught two... but he gave them both to me!!! As we went back to shore I continued to take abuse from all the lads, and I thought to myself “Alright you bunch of Cornish wankers, I’ll show you!” I wasn’t going to take this one lying down!

After the boat was safely put away, and stored in the boat house, all the lads went into the pub and I shot across to an office I had access to. I went on to the internet and did a quick google search (related to Barking and its fishing history) and would you “adam and eve” it... the local paper (in the previous month and in May, 2009) had done a big article on Barking and its fishing heritage, and even more unbelievably, the headline of the story declared:
“Barking: Biggest Fishing Fleet in the World”

It went on to say that by the mid-nineteenth century the Barking fishing fleet consisted of over 220 fishing smacks and that almost every family in Barking was involved in the fishing industry in one way or another.

“Top drawer!” I thought then I printed it out and went running back to the pub and entered with a big smirk on my face. I saw Steino, with the rest of the lads, and announced:

“Steino, I was wrong mate, I’m really sorry... Barking wasn’t the biggest fishing port in England after all... it was the biggest one in the world!!” I broadcast at the top of my voice, while putting the printed copy of the article in his face! “You bunch of Cornish wankers!” I then declared with a booming voice and with the biggest smile that I think I have ever mustered!

“Have some of that,” I thought, knock-out punch, bang, job done!

Steino grabbed the article and read it in disbelief. He was lost for words and I don’t think he ever recovered. He certainly never gave me a dig about fishing again!!!

... I must have looked a right idiot, sitting there laughing to myself, but I didn’t care. It was such a fond memory and I went on to remember participating in the Great River Race (with the Gig Club) later the same year. That was a great day too, and lots of fun, rowing up the Thames from Millwall to Ham, but again it highlighted the absolute disconnection myself (and most people from East London) seem to now have from the River Thames.

The Great River Race has been running for over 20 years and is a massive annual event with over 300 boats involved and around 2500 people participating. It is reputedly the single biggest event of its kind in Europe, yet, until I got involved in Gig racing in Cornwall, I had never heard of it! And neither, I must add, had anyone I knew in East London! As I sat there, reminiscing and wondering what the scene would have looked like in times gone by, I felt a great kind of sadness for the connection that had been lost. I suddenly felt subdued. I looked across the river, collected my things, and pressed on.

The next section of the path was looking very pleasant. It was a very green stretch, with a walkway and a track finding their ways alongside the embankment of the river. I finally felt like I was leaving the confinements of the inner city and started to embrace the feeling of the openness and fresh air. It was still hard going on my feet though, as most of the path was quite gravelly and the shock up my leg (whenever I trod on a stone underneath my heel) was starting to become quite excruciating. Once again, an initial reprieve from the pain of walking had quickly descended into agony, and now the backs of my heels had started to wear and become enflamed as well.

I negotiated this agreeably green section of the track and then came to a part of the path that looked quite impressive (from the point at which I encountered it).
Laid out before me, stretching out as far as my eye could see and bearing to the left (the north), was a paved area - a wide walkway hugging the bank of the Thames and separating it from a residential area to its right (the south). I walked a short distance and then had to surrender again. I needed another rest. The affliction to my feet was now turning into torture, and I have to admit, it was beginning to wear me down and beat me.

By now, I was starting to notice that there were other effects it was having on my body. The awkward way I was ambling at times, coupled with the weight of my backpack, meant that I was slightly off balance through much of my rambling action and I’d also been compensating for that with the use of the muscles of my upper body. This had, in turn, resulted in me walking with my back and hips at slightly askew angles throughout much of the day.

Though imperceptible to notice during, the cumulative effect was such that my upper body was now experiencing the onset of fatigue. Muscles that I never knew I had were feeling tight and my back and hips had also begun to ache. I took my backpack off and sat down, once again, on a wall along the pathway.

I refreshed myself, drinking some water and splashing some of it on my face. It was such a hot day, the hottest of the year thus far (as I found out later). Just as I’d prepared myself for another assault along the path (it was really beginning to feel that way) an African gentleman approached me and engaged me in conversation by handing me a flyer from his Church. Seeing as he came across as a very genuine and nice fellow, and doubly seeing as I was on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, I took up the opportunity to speak with him and see where the conversation may lead...

Ok, cards on the table now. Although I was doing a pilgrimage from one Christian place of worship to another, I don’t actually consider myself to be a Christian. I was Christened into the religion after I was born and I feel I live in a Christian culture. I also like to visit Churches (especially at Christmas for Midnight Mass), but I don’t feel that that makes me a Christian as I have a whole range of other values and understandings which are not encompassed “officially” by Christianity.

I am an Anglo-Saxon and I have discovered that I also relate to many Pagan values, and to the many understandings I’ve inherited from the land in to which I was born. I also see that many Pagan traditions have actually been re-packaged and assimilated into the Christian Religion, without that truth being acknowledged. But this is not to say that I consider myself to be a Pagan either, however, I once read that because Pagans don’t like to be labelled a true Pagan would never identify them self as being Pagan anyway... so now I don’t know where that leaves me!!!

Fundamentally though, I see myself as being a Spiritual person and I believe that Spirituality is the pursuit of truth - the truth of who you are, the truth of the meaning of life and the truth about the nature of the Universe - wherever you may find it.

And that’s what I think the point of us all being here is... to rediscover the truth.
Throughout my life I have always asked these questions and I have investigated their answers, by learning as much as I can from the world around me and by learning from all of the world’s religions and their teachings. There is wisdom to be found in each and every one. They can most certainly be an avenue to Spirituality and of obtaining an enlightenment (as many testify too), but I’ve always felt that religions (in general) can be very dogmatic in their approach, not only desiring to control people rather than having the intention of setting them free, but also by creating fear in people and withholding the very truth that they seek. Sometimes they even tell people to deny their own hearts and it is at that point where, for me, religion becomes anti-spiritual.

From what I’ve found, every religion appears to have a set of rules to follow in order to live a good and righteous life, but it is in Paganism that I have discovered the simplest, and yet, the most complete ideals by which to live. They are simply:

1) Respect yourself
2) Respect others
3) Respect your environment

That covers everything doesn’t it? What more is there? In love you find respect and everything else follows after that. That’s definitely how I see life and those rules are certainly how I have tried to live mine. I may have failed at times, sometimes quite miserably, but I have tried. But then again, and as Yoda once said to Skywalker:

“Try not. Do... or do not. There is no try.”

You see what I mean; wisdom can be found everywhere, even in the “fictitious” religion of the Jedi! I think I’m now on the road to doing (in all aspects of my life) and not trying. How about you? It’s a good question to ask yourself.

... Benjamin was indeed a good man. We made our introductions and he explained to me what he was doing. He was out trying to spread the word of God, and I felt, not in a preaching kind of way, but more of a “This is my truth... this is the truth I have found... would you like to hear it? It may be of help to you.” He came across as being very genuine and honest in his intentions, and he didn’t have the ”Listen to me, I am Gods messenger, you need to be saved!” kind of attitude.

I know I’ve come across people like that very often before and they never seem to be thinking for themselves. They just appear to be preaching a mantra of one form or another, and whenever you pose them an intelligent question, they rarely have their own answer for it, but instead just repeat another mantra they have learnt.

He then enquired about my backpack and I explained to him what I was doing.

“What? You’re walking all the way to Canterbury? Where will you stay?” he said.
“Oh, I’m just going to camp wild and find a nice spot each night,” I replied.
“Can you do that?” he asked, both intrigued and with an air of disbelief.
“Yeah, as long as you’re respectful and don’t make a nuisance of yourself,” I answered.
“And you have all your stuff with you?” his inquisitive questioning continued.
“Yep, everything I need is in my pack... and the most important thing I have is my meths burner, so that I can have a cup of tea in the morning!” I said with an air of self-depreciating amusement.

Benjamin just looked at me with a compounded look of both awe and of the impossible. He said he’d never known anyone to do such a thing and appeared to be quite amazed that I was. It was in my mind that I should be moving on, but there was something in my heart that said I should stay a bit longer and talk to this fellow. I always follow my heart, so it wasn’t a difficult decision!

There was something a bit different about Benjamin. I felt like he had an open mind and an open heart, and we actually went onto have a conversation whereby he told me his understandings about his faith and I told him my understandings about my own spirituality (basically what I mentioned previously). He listened to me and I listened to him. At points we both challenged each other with intelligent questions and in reply we both gave well thought out and heartfelt answers.

It was a respectful conversation between two open minds and, as it turned out, and in essence, we agreed about the most fundamental things. That the world was made of energy and that energy (in its most powerful form) was Love... and that Love was the truth. We agreed that an intelligence greater than our own had created the Universe and that Love was the true nature of that intelligence. We had some minor differences with the terminologies we used to define this intelligence - Benjamin called the intelligence “God” and I referred to it as “Consciousness” - but our understanding was the same.

The only fundamental that we didn’t agree whole heartedly on was the nature of Jesus Christ himself. Benjamin insisted that he was the “Son of God” and that he “Came here as our saviour” (to show us the way) and that he “Died for our sins”. I maintained that if he did exist, then he was an enlightened human being who was trying to inform us that we were all the sons and daughters of God, and as such, were all aspects of God himself (and so part of a greater oneness)... and that his message was not that he was here as our saviour, but rather to teach us of our own abilities and the power that we possessed. I explained that for me, and if he did exist, he was a Master who had demonstrated human potential.

We both agreed that he was here to teach us and the conversation reached a natural conclusion - what we believed to be the truth about Jesus Christ himself.

It had been a very enjoyable conversation and I was pleased that I had made the effort to stay and talk with Benjamin. Almost an hour had passed and I was aware that I really should be getting a move on. Benjamin asked if he could take my mobile number, but I explained that I didn’t have one because I hated the things
and thought that they went against life in so many ways. There was an opportunity for another conversation there... but I really needed to be heading on!

It was late afternoon, approaching early evening, and I really had to find somewhere appropriate to camp. We said our goodbyes, and gave our best wishes, and I watched him walk into the distance, trying to engage other people by handing out his church leaflet. "Nice bloke (Benjamin)," I thought to myself. I knew that I may never see him again, but I still felt like I had made a friend, a very good one.

As I set off once more, I was suddenly aware that throughout most of the conversation I’d had (with Benjamin) I’d been standing on my feet and hadn’t given them the complete rest that I should have (and could have) done. I was hobbling straight away and my condition deteriorated rapidly. I was fucked mate. I looked out upon the long impressive footway... but it no longer seemed impressive to me anymore... it now looked impossible and never ending.

All parts of my feet were now screaming “Sit the fuck back down you bastard, we’ve had enough!” and I was ready to cry. Every step upon my heel sent a shock right up my leg and along my spine, and the pain was now almost double because of the rawness on the backs of my heels too. There was nowhere to hide, and no way to compensate. There wasn’t even a way back, just forward, one step at a time. I was really hobbling along, but every time I saw someone coming towards me I put on a brave face (as they approached) and then fell to bits, with my face contorted in agony, once they had passed.

It’s funny, you know, my Nan is someone who I would best describe as an absolute Lady... who comes from Barking. You will never hear her say a foul word of any kind and she is not very fond of hearing them either. In fact, the worst thing that I have ever heard my Nan call anyone is “dollop drawers”, as in “He’s a right dollop drawer’s.” This would only ever been in jest, of course, because my Nan would never say such a thing maliciously. She doesn’t do things like that and that’s what makes her such a special person.

In case you haven’t worked out what that phrase means yet, I’ll try to explain. Right then, and as I had been hobbling along, I was actually doing the most wonderful impersonation of someone who had, in fact, done a dollop in their drawers! Are you with me now? However, and quite conversely, whenever I saw someone coming the other way I must have looked as if I had severe constipation - such was the expression on my face! It really wasn’t good, but in between the internal screaming I allowed myself a little giggle! But it wasn’t a laughing matter...

Ok, if there is anyone reading this (who is like my Nan) and is grossly offended by foul language, then I recommend that you skip this next section (which is in block capitals) because it will be quite saturated with expletives. I make no apology for this as it has been my intention to write this account as openly, and as honestly, as I
can. I feel that my primary responsibility is to that of the truth, as I experienced it, and not to any individual's sensitivities. That, again, is another sentiment that I think Brian Haw would relate to.

For the record (and so you may understand me and my perspective that much better) I do regard myself as a gentleman, but I also accept that I have within me a geezer from Barking and, quite frankly, if that wasn't for that part of me then there would have been no way that I could have got through the ordeal that was about to set itself upon me. Without a shadow of a doubt (and whether it be ungentlemanly or not) I am glad that I have this aspect of my personality to call upon.

... I continued on as best I could, and for as long as I could, with the pain I was experiencing, but it was becoming too much. At some point along that never ending walkway – and I feel ashamed to admit it - I felt beaten and was ready to give up. It was a horrible moment. I just wanted to throw in the towel and for it all to be over. I went to sit down... and then... Barking turned up...

"DON'T YOU DARE SURRENDER YOU DIRTY FUCKING SLAG OF A CUNT!!!!!!!!!! DON'T YOU FUCKING DARE!!! STAND!!! STAND!!! YOU WILL FUCKING STAND AND KEEP WALKING!!! COME ON CUNT!!! BRIAN HAW SPENT 10 YEARS OF HIS LIFE DOING WHAT HE DID AND YOU THINK YOU'RE GONNA GIVE UP LIKE SOME KIND OF FUCKING NONSE!!! I DON'T GIVE A FUCK ABOUT YOUR FEET!!! FUCK YOUR FEET!!!!... YOU WILL NOT SURRENDER... UNDERSTAND?... DO NOT SURRENDER!!!!! WALK... FUCKING WALK!!!!! LEFT FOOT RIGHT FOOT... LEFT FOOT FUCKING RIGHT FOOT!!!!... FUCKING SLAG OF A CUNT!!!! WALK!!!"

I beasted myself, I absolutely beasted myself... and I kept walking, I kept fucking walking! And I didn't surrender, I didn't fucking surrender!!! I carried on walking and continued as best I could. Bubbles came into my head and I shouted to myself:

"SING, THAT'S RIGHT, FUCKING SING... (in your head)"

And so I did, over and over again...

"I'm forever blowing bubbles, 
Pretty bubbles in the air, 
They fly so high, 
They reach the sky, 
They're like my dreams, 
They fade and die, 
Fortunes always hiding, 
I've looked everywhere, 
I'm forever blowing bubbles, 
Pretty bubbles in the air!"
United! – United! – United!

IRONS – Irons – IRONS – Irons!!!

I imagined that I was in the Bobby Moore Lower, in the terraces at Upton Park, and it worked miracles, it worked fucking miracles! I still felt intense pain with every step, but I was working through it, and once I’d sorted my apathetic psychology out I started to try and pretend that there was no pain at all. This was working too and it seemed that I was then going through 5 minute cycles of pretending that there was no pain, and so the pain actually feeling dramatically reduced for a brief period of time, then slowly but surely having to acknowledge - once again - that it bloody hurt and the pain would return in a deluge!

Somehow, I carried on, leaving the breath-taking (and in that moment psychologically challenging) stretch of riverside pavement behind me. It was difficult, but I persisted, and then I entered upon a section of the pathway which was very industrial and, I was to find, included a sewage works! I thought to myself that I was glad that I was traversing this section on a Saturday evening (it was past 6pm by then) so that the factories were closed and I didn’t have to deal with all the industrial chemical smells that I was sure would be in existence on a weekday. But the sewage works? Well, there was no getting away from that! Lovely!

As I departed this unsightly part of the riverside I saw, a number of yards in front of me, a man sitting on a bench. It was time to muster my “constipation” look and I attempted to walk by as inconspicuously as I possibly could. This I did to no avail as I caught eye contact with the middle-aged man and he immediately engaged me in conversation.

“You alright mate?” he said after taking a swig on his beer “My missus has left me. She’s cleaned me out mate. Taken everything I got.”

To be honest, my first impression of him was that he was a “wino” and I was going to just nod an acknowledgement and move swiftly on (well, as swiftly I could at that moment in time!). But his sudden (and direct) explanation of his circumstance took me by surprise and I found myself immediately feeling a bit of compassion for him. I hesitated, and that was all it required for him to offer me a beer.

“No, I’m ok mate,” I replied, and then “Thanks anyway,” in order to be polite.

I wasn’t ok though, I was actually gagging for a beer, but I felt that it may have already been a bad idea to have stopped to talk to this bloke, without getting further involved and accepting a beverage.

“Women hey… they can do that,” I then sympathised.

“Taken everything, she has. I’ve got nothing now,” he continued while looking aimlessly into space.

“Well, whatever’s happened all I can say is learn from it bud and don’t allow yourself to be mugged off like that again,” I said by way of attempted advice.
He wasn’t listening though. The poor geezer really did look like a lost soul with nowhere to go. He looked like he’d already had a couple of beers, but didn’t seem too intoxicated. He came across as a pretty genuine bloke actually and I believed everything he was saying.

“Who do you support mate?” he suddenly interjected, with a change of tone.

“West Ham, squire, how about you?” I answered and returned the question.

“Irons, Irons!” he said with a face that had suddenly lit up “Here, you’ll like this then,” he said while pulling out a carrier bag from behind the bench.

It was amazing, this geezer, who, by his own account and testimony, had just been “cleaned out” by his ex-missus, and, who he said had taken everything that he had, had, in fact, neglected to strip him of every single thing, because, he still had, along with a carrier bag full of beers, another carrier bag that contained (and I shall take a moment to pause)... an album, an album that appeared, on first introduction, to be his most prized possession on all of planet Earth, and an album that contained all of his... West Ham United memorabilia!!!

I absolutely couldn’t believe it! This man (who one moment ago was close to winning the award for the most maunderin man I had ever encountered) was suddenly transformed! He started flicking through the pages, showing me extracts from this game, from that game, signatures from that player, from this player. It was quite unbelievable and I struggled to take it all in.

“How do you think we’ll do next season then?” he asked.

“Well, I think we’re bang on for promotion, but I don’t think it’s gonna be pretty,” I said and then added “I’m actually glad we went down though. It’s been 5 years of nonsense and it might finally sort us out.”

“It all went wrong when Rednapp left,” he surmised.

“Yeah, I make you right, but Pardew did alright for a while though, then it all went wrong again!” I said jokingly.

“Yeah, always goes wrong don’t it,” he replied.

I could see in his eyes that he was suddenly thinking about his ex-missus again.

“Do you know what mate? I know what it’s like to be cleaned out. It’s like when Brown sacked Rednapp. It basically ended up with us getting relegated the next season and selling all our crown jewel players to Tottenham and Chelsea! We got mugged right off didn’t we?!” I said very quickly.

“Yeah, imagine where we would have been with that lot,” he said with his eyes lighting up again.

“Champions League I reckon!” I declared.

“Yeah... Champions League! Irons!” he shouted.

“Irons!” I repeated.

And I took that as my cue to start making tracks, as I felt that I had done all that I could for the fellow.

“I gotta be off now mate, but there’s always next season hey. Never surrender!” I declared in an enthusiastic voice.
“Yeah, Come on you Irons!” he said.

I started to depart and then heard him say “Irons” again, and so I followed suit as I headed off into the distance. I had the feeling that I had negotiated that pretty well and I hoped that he would be alright.

I really couldn’t believe what had just happened there though. Not because I’d bumped into this fellow, but because of his story and what it said. Here’s a bloke who was on the verge of despair, and who had “lost everything”, and the only things he had in his possession were two carrier bags; one filled with beer (which was quite understandable), but the other?

I was dumbfounded by his treasured possession and I was sure that that kind of example was probably not an isolated case. So what did it say about the state of people? When your most prized possession, the one thing you hold on to when there is nothing left to hold on to, is an album full of football memorabilia, an album comprised of (with regards to life, the universe and everything) pretty insubstantial information (let’s be honest). And the way he perked up? The immediate way he escaped from his plight, and his predicament, because of it, for however brief a period of time. What did that say?

As I was thinking this, I then realised that throughout the conversation (about the memorabilia) I had completely forgotten about the pain in my feet and it was only at that point that I became aware of the pain again! What did that say? I had to concede that football was still my escapism too!

I then thought that we all have our escapisms, and ok, for the predominance of men it was football. For women, I thought, maybe their predominant escapism was the television soap operas. I couldn’t say that with certainty, but I had an inkling. Either way, and even if those observations aren’t statistically true, I felt sure that every person had their own method to escape and I was also sure that drink and drugs would play a part in most of them too… but the real question was:

To escape from what?

What was it that was so wrong with our lives, with our society, with our civilisation, that so many of us felt the need to escape; to indulge in something that doesn’t really matter; to take our minds away from the position we find ourselves in; to, in effect, hide?

What was it that we were really hiding from?

That is the question isn’t it? That’s the big question. And there will be many answers. Answers on a postcard to:

“What’s the answer competition?” PO Box D0 UN0!!!

Actually, I don’t think it’s as important to know the answer, but rather, it’s more important is to ask the question. And I thought that as long as you did, and you realised what you were doing, then perhaps escapism wasn’t always such a bad
thing after all. Maybe we all needed to do it, at times, in order to get through our experiences and the trials of life. Maybe that is why football is top of the escapism activity league, because it does demonstrate a truth about life itself and the nature of its renewal... no matter what happens there will always be another "season", a new beginning and a fresh start just waiting over the horizon. A new moment (and a clean sheet) in which you can begin again. Hope always springs eternal... and it certainly does in football.

My thoughts then turned back to thinking about Brian Haw (and my feet!) and I was now acutely aware that I was gasping for a beer! It had been a long day. It was now around seven in the evening and it was still quite hot. Although lowering in the beautiful blue sky, the sun was still shining and it was still shining brightly.

I managed to find my way to the Riverside Gardens, in Erith, and thought that this would be a nice place for another break. I found a little newsagent nearby, bought an ice cold beer and returned to sit in the sun. Oh... it was bliss and I savoured the moment. The thing is though... after you've had a cheeky one, you always feel like a cheeky two... and I half thought about it, but I maintained the discipline to carry on!

I was now walking through the town centre, in Erith, and it took all of my will power not to show any sign of the pain I was in. I slowly, and carefully, took one pace at a time. I knew from my map that, just past Erith, there was some open space (and some greenery) and I was banking on there being an appropriate place to camp. If there wasn't, I knew that I was (somehow) going to have to make it all the way to Dartford, and I dreaded the thought.

I came upon a supermarket and went in to by some fresh supplies. A bit of fruit, some milk for the morning, a couple of cans of beer and a 5 litre bottle of water. I figured I needed that much water, not only to replenish my fluids, but also so I could have a good wash before I retired to bed. I left the supermarket carrying the carrier bag of supplies in one hand and the gallon of water in the other. With my backpack on my back, and through gritted teeth, I resumed my extreme torture.

The Thames Path, at this point, heads slightly inland and through an industrial park which is probably quite awful to walk through at the best of times, but for me at that moment it had strayed into the abysmal. Even though it was a Saturday evening there remained much traffic passing through and the pavement was inundated with curbs and vehicle entrances. It was very dusty and quite disenchanting. My body ached, my back felt awkward and even my hips felt out of sorts. I really needed to find a place to camp and soon.

By the end of the stretch of road salvation appeared to materialise. I had finally reached the green area that I had noted on the map. There was a small road way, leading to a car park, which in turn denoted the entrance to a “Country Park” kind of area. Halleluiah! Finally I was there, and I hoped that this would indeed be the answer to my prayers!
I ambled along the track, which was bordered by a field enclosing some horses. It seemed quite inaccessible, and not entirely appropriate to camp in, so I had to move on further. “Damn,” I thought and persevered in my search. I followed the track further along and hoped that I would find a good spot.

As I passed through a car park, I saw where the path rejoined the banks of the River Thames and what a sight it was! It was perfect! It was the first example of natural river bank I had come across that day and it looked exquisite in the evening sunshine, almost like a country meadow beckoning me to come and walk through it.

But then, what was that I could hear disturbing the tranquil setting? A scrambler was hurtling along the path in the distance and towards a group of young lads awaiting its arrival. The scrambler arrived with a screech, the lads swapped over riders and the next person took their turn. They were obviously using the path as a track to burn along.

“Bugger, bugger, bugger!” I thought. This was where I was hoping to set up camp for the night and I couldn’t do that while these youngsters were there (you always want to pitch a wild camp in a place where there is no one around and in a place that is relatively unseen). The young people all looked at me as I approached them and I had no choice but to continue walking onwards. As I passed, they all gave me a puzzled look and I gave a nod of acknowledgement in return. I was obviously a very peculiar sight to them, with my backpack, gallon of water, carrier bag and look of constipation!

About fifty yards after I’d passed them, I stopped and surveyed the landscape. There was a low lying area of grassland to my left (and by the waterside) which would have been perfect if it wasn’t for the proximity of the youngsters, but I also noted that the path bared around to the right further ahead and I felt hopeful that there would be an ideal spot there.

“Come on, not far to go now,” I thought to myself.

I resumed walking along the path, and towards the bend, when the scrambler came back into view on its return leg. Not wishing to spoil the lads enjoyment, I stepped to the side of the path, in order to allow ample room for the bike to pass and so I didn’t risk being knocked over! What was nice though (and quite surprising I have to admit) was that twenty or so yards before the kid reached me, he slowed right down so as not to disrupt me too much. As he went by me, at a very slow speed, he then gave a nod of thanks and appreciation. I reciprocated the nod and after he passed me he sped back up into top gear again!

“Nice touch,” I thought “Young man... nice touch.”

As I continued I heard the bike coming back, once more from behind me, so I repeated my “Path Evacuation Procedure” once more, and again, the next youngster slowed right down and gave a nod of thanks as he passed quite close by to me. I couldn’t argue with that and I thought “Fair play.”

The bike was very noisy, and created much dust as it sped at full speed away, and that (I have to admit) I found highly irritating. But I also remembered what it
was like to be that age and I didn’t want to ruin their fun. They were taking liberties by doing what they were doing, and in a place that they really should not be doing it, but it didn’t bother me that much and I didn’t see that they were doing any harm.

It was a Saturday evening and there really wasn’t anyone about. I thought that it was better for them to be out here, and doing this, rather than them getting bored and doing something abusive somewhere else. I thought again that there were probably plenty of tracks these days, for them to be using instead, but I also knew what it was like - those tracks cost money and sometimes you and all of your friends haven’t got it... or... those tracks are just not open on a Saturday evening!

I saw that I could walk just as well along the low lying grass and so I departed the path and carried on walking adjacent to it. Then something quite amazing happened. As the bike came speeding back, the young fellow looked at me and saw what I had done. Even though I was nowhere near the path anymore, and even though it was clear that he would not be disturbing me in any way, he still slowed right down and gave me a nod of thanks and acknowledgement.

“Top drawer,” I thought “Young man... top drawer.”

“You know what?” I thought then, “Young people in general, and by and large, are good.”...

That has always been my experience. There are so many good natured and decent youngsters out there and I am sick of the bad press they are so often labelled with.

Yes, young people can be poorly behaved at times, but I have found (through all of my experience) that there is usually an underlying reason for that poor behaviour and the reason is usually because, at some point in their past, they have been failed by an adult in some way and have not received enough of the right kind of attention (love) or have been given the right kind of guidance (boundaries).

I have found that usually their negative actions are by way of a test to see how much you really care and if shown what respect is, and if given respectful boundaries, then every young person (who I have ever worked with or encountered) has responded positively and (eventually) with reciprocated respect. That is my experience and that is what I was thinking after the young man’s kind gesture.

... and I didn’t mind what they were doing. They weren’t harming me.

The grassland diminished, as the track turned a corner, and so I climbed back up the short embanked grass verge in order to rejoin the path. As I reached its zenith, laid out before me was... Paradise!

“Oh my God! What a relief!” I thought.

The day was almost over and I had found the perfect spot. It was a beautiful grass river bank, around the corner from where the group of lads were standing several hundred yards away, and out of sight from anyone other than those using the path.
I could see people in the bar at Erith Yacht Club, further down river and perhaps half a mile away, but they were not close enough to notice me. Other than that, there was only the river and a beautiful sun... lowering in the perfect blue sky and preparing to set, over the back drop of Rainham Marshes, on the opposite side of the River Thames. After the ordeal I’d been through that day, this was Heaven.

I descended back down the short verge and relieved myself of all I was carrying. How good was that! I immediately felt 10 feet tall and I took my shoes off and felt them touch the soft grass. Ah... don’t get me wrong, they were still painful, but just being out of the poor footwear reduced the pain by half! I sat down, then I laid back into the long grass and looked upon the heavens.

“You could get lost in a sky like that,” I thought. It was truly exquisite.

It was just before 9pm and I reckoned I had about another hour and a half left of daylight. The bike went by again (on the path behind me) and I thought that I wouldn’t be able to set up camp just yet. I’d have to wait until the young group had had enough and disappeared. There was only one thing for it then... time for a beer!

It was actually a really joyous moment, hearing the can open, taking a swig and putting it to my forehead. The scenery was delightful. I really couldn’t have dreamed for a better place to camp and I was grateful that my intuition had served me so well. I hadn’t expected a natural site like this though and I couldn’t believe that a location like this still existed along the banks of the crowded River Thames.

As I sank my beer, I thought back over the day I’d just had... and what a day it had been! I inspected my feet and they were red raw in places. The blister’s on both the bottoms of my heels measured approximately one inch by one and a half inches, and the one’s that stretched out across both the balls of my feet measured about three inches by one inch. The blisters around my little toes, and on the back of my heels, were quite severe, but in all honesty they were just “run of the mill” in comparison to the oval blisters on the bottom of my heels. It was those that had been the real killer’s throughout most of the day and even the very large blisters, across the balls of my feet, created pain that was nothing in comparison.

The astonishing thing was though, somehow (and maybe the cardboard played a part in it, I don’t know) not one part of my skin had been broken and no blisters had burst. It was astounding. I was shocked and I actually felt quite blessed (would you believe). After all, I’d been through a day like that and... I was still in the game!!!

Amazing. I was truly amazed.

I poured water over my feet, and raised them slightly, as I sat there in the grass. I felt the light breeze from the river blowing around them and so cooling them even further. Oh the bliss... the absolute bliss. I didn’t feel pain anymore, just a warm throbbing sensation and an uncanny sense that they were already beginning to heal.

“Those damn shoes,” I thought “Bloody Holy Land!” Then I had a little laugh to myself and in that moment I realised something...
... My Pilgrimage was in remembrance of Brian Haw, and what he had done for what he believed in, and on that day, the 25th June 2011, I had spent the best part of it thinking about him and what he had done. In fact, it was only because I was remembering Brian Haw that I had managed to get through the day at all!!!

There was a peculiarity about the way I was suddenly feeling though. On the one hand I felt thankful for the help I’d received in getting through the day, and yet, on the other, I felt that I had been tested in some way and that I had just passed that test...

(Now this will sound ever so dramatic, I know, and I hope I am not entering into the realms of self-indulgence when I retell this moment, but I do want to make this account as honest a reflection of my experience as I can, and this is what happened next, and I how I genuinely felt)

...I looked to the heavens and my eyes filled with tears. It’s hard to express how I felt in that moment, I cannot describe. But Brian Haw was a very intelligent man, a very astute man and a very wise man, who endured much for the cause of “life” that he so much believed, and as I sat there in the long grass by the River Thames, I just hoped that I had proved (in that day) that I was worthy enough to have been doing what I was doing. I put my hands together... and I prayed.

I told you it was dramatic didn’t I!!!

I heard the motor bike, as it passed behind me, once more. The sun was just setting over Rainham Marshes (and I finished my beer as it did so) leaving a light red and orange haze stretching out across the horizon. It was so beautiful and I felt so fortunate to be where I was. It was time to put my tent up, regardless of the youngsters. I put my flip flops on and I set about positioning my tent on the flattest piece of ground I could find before I erected it. Once done, I started settling in and I unpacked my sleeping gear.

The bike returned again, and I noticed it slow down as it passed the part of the path closest to me. The lad was having “a nose”, but I thought it was ok as I didn’t think that they were going to bother me in any way. I made myself some food, grabbed my other beer and sat half-way in my tent while taking in the wonderful scene as the light began to fade. The sky slowly turned from its quintessential “sky” blue to that of a darker pigment. I could still see Erith Yacht Club in the distance and I saw that there were people out on what looked like the terrace of a bar.

I was waiting for dusk to set in, so that I could then have a shower before I retired to bed. I was a little bit concerned that someone may be able to see me, but I usually work to the a general principle that “If I can see no one... then no one can see me”. As the light faded, and the blue gave way to black, I could only see a short distance away from me and there was no sign or sound of the youngsters (and their motorbike) anymore. So it was time for me to strip off and have a good wash! It
was a lovely place, so very peaceful, and there was no longer anyone around.

After I’d washed, and dried myself, I put on my night clothes and attended to my feet. The redness had subsided to that of a dark pink and the fluid in the blisters had already reduced a little. It was pleasing to see. I massaged them for a while and then applied copious amounts of Savalon. After that, I got into my sleeping bag, raised my feet slightly (by putting a pile clothes at the bottom of my bedding) and went to zip up my tent.

“Goodnight world,” I said, as I took in my last view of it before I closed my eyes to sleep. Some stars were starting to appear in the night sky and the air felt very still. I zipped my tent up and allowed my head to hit the pillow. And then I slept.
I am just writing this to affirm why I am doing this pilgrimage + to thank you for taking the time to speak to me about it. I had planned on leaving on the solstice, but it didn't feel right to do that day. I feel much more settled now that I have spoken to you + happy in the knowledge that I am approaching this the right way.

When I reach Canterbury I shall say a prayer of peace + love for your congregation + for the people ofBanking. And I shall remember this parish by lighting a candle for it.

I am walking for the world in which I wish to live - a world which is not controlled by money, but is filled with peace, love + truth. I shall also walk in remembrance of Brian Haw - a man who had the courage to stand for justice (in peace), no matter what the consequence it had to himself. I think that's worth remembering.

May we all have that courage.

All my love,
Left: Curfew Tower, Barking Abbey
Below: St. Margaret’s Church

Left: Steps to the Altar - Affirmation
Below: The ruins of the Cloisters

Left: The Nave and the path ahead
Below: Looking back at Barking Abbey
Left: East Ham Town Hall

Right: View of West Ham United FC at Prory Rd.

Left: The Boleyn Pub

Right: Statue with Bobby Moore

Left: View of the Barking Barrier (in the distance) along the Greenway

Right: Barking Road – Where I met Terry
Left: St. Margaret’s Church Pentagram
Below: Millennium Dome and River Lea

Above Left: Millennium Dome from across the Thames on the Isle of Dogs
Above Right: Canary Wharf Complex from Island Gardens

Above Left and Right: Opposing views of No. 1 Canary Wharf and the Millennium Dome
Above Left: View of Naval College Buildings and Greenwich Park
Above Right: Greenwich Foot Tunnel

Left: Cutty Sark
Greenwich

Right: Thames Pathway through the back streets of Greenwich

Above Left: View of the Thames Barrier (in the distance)
Above Right: Greenwich Peninsular Ecological Park
Below Left: View of the Thames West towards the Isle of Dogs
Below Right: View back along the Thames Path towards the Thames Barrier

Below Left: View East along the Thames of Woolwich Ferry
Below Right:
Bench at Woolwich where I cut the cardboard “Pizza Box” to shape

Above Left: Woolwich Arsenal (or the Royal Arsenal Woolwich!)
Above Right: Last look Westward back towards “The Island”
Above Left: “Paradise” discovered by the banks of the River Thames!
Above Right: First night’s camp site (with Erith Yacht Club in the background)

Below Left: Lunch stop by the Thames with view of Barking in the distance
Below Right: Barking Barrier by the mouth of the River Roding

Right: Where I met the West Ham Supporter
Below: Where I met Benjamin
I awoke to the bright sun shining down on my tent and I opened up the zip to behold the world once more. What a fantastically beautiful sight! There were blue skies above (again) with not a cloud to be seen. A light breeze beat down on the long green grass surrounding me, cooling me from the “greenhouse” that was now my accommodation. The Thames exuded a calmness that immersed me as I gazed upon it and I enjoyed watching some sailing boats as they meandered along the dusty brown coloured river.

“What a truly special and exceptional morning,” I thought.

My next thought went immediately to that of my feet. How were they? That was the imminent question. I was eager to discover whether or not the treatment of Savalon (and of them being raised throughout the night) had made any difference. They weren’t throbbing anymore, so that was my first positive sign.

I drew them up close to my body, so that I could inspect them, and they didn’t look too bad at all. They were still pink in most of the places that had taken the worst of the hammering, but the fluid in the blisters had drained away. The skin on the bottom of my heels (which concerned me the most) had turned to a dried out yellow, but around the edge of the former blister the pink still remained. It gave me quite a tingling sensation when I touched it. I actually found it to be quite pleasurable and relaxing! It made me feel even more chilled then I already was... was that possible? Of course it was, because I had yet to make my mandatory morning cup of tea!

I assigned myself to setting up my meth’s burner (in order to boil some water in my mess tin) and began my morning routine. My feet actually felt quite well, as I stood up, and my heels weren’t giving me any trouble. In fact, they were continuing to give me the tingling and pleasurable sensation that I felt when I massaged and inspected them. Was this a good sign or not? I didn’t care, I was just thankful that the agony was over and was both amazed, and impressed, with the power of my recovery.

As the water boiled, I dressed, washed and prepared my breakfast (of muesli) in my other mess tin. The timing of the completion of these tasks coincided exactly with the boiling of the water (I’m good aren’t I!) and the arrival of my cup of Earl Grey “Rosey Lea”.

“Perfect!” I thought.

And it really was, sitting there, on my own little part of England and watching the world go by while drinking my cup of tea. As I sat, I saw little insects, mingling in the blades of grass beside me, and others flying around. I saw a small yacht, sailing by on the river, with the crew upon it clearly enjoying their sense of freedom on the water and in the clear morning sunshine. There were planes flying in the sky, over and beyond the Rainham Marshes, and I observed other people milling around Erith
Yacht Club close by. A man walked along the footpath (behind me) and looked over at me as I sat there, chilled, with my tea in hand. I thought “Bugger, I’ve been collared,” but he just gave me a warm smile (which I returned) and carried on walking. He actually gave me the impression that he wouldn’t have half minded sitting where I was, and doing what I was doing, himself!

I finished my breakfast, and finished my tea, and decided to pack up camp. I’d indulged for long enough and I had to get going. I attended to my feet by covering them (again) in Savalon and by placing plasters on the backs of my heels and around my little toes. I then carefully put my shoes back on. I dreaded the moment of truth as I stood up and took a couple of “trial strides”.

“My God!” I thought, then “… it still fits!” just as Steve Martin entered my head!

I couldn’t believe it! I really couldn’t. Ok, of course they didn’t feel perfect, far from it, but the only feeling I had was that of mild discomfort and not pain.

“Top drawer, I’m back in the game! Bang on, let’s have it!” I thought...

Alright, be honest with me now. What are you thinking at the moment? Are you in the camp of “Good on you mate! Keep going” or have you returned to the camp of “What a silly wally you really are… there’s going to be trouble ahead!” with a premonition of imminent disaster? Do you really need to answer that question? Of course you don’t, because the simple truth is that I’ve already answered it for you! The clue has already been given and Steve Martin turning up in my thoughts at that point was really not a good omen!

Yes, I was a silly billy of a wally, but delay your derision for just a moment, because I hadn’t realised it myself… just yet!

... I started to pack up camp, beginning by rolling up my sleeping bag and roll mat then proceeding to dissemble my tent, when a couple passed by on the path (cycling towards Dartford) and were peering at me. Even from the short distance I was away from them I could see, quite clearly, that they were giving me “dirty” looks.

“Charming,” I thought and then “Well if you’ve got something to say, say it!” while returning their stare unapologetically. They both simultaneous turned and looked the other way, resuming on their bike ride to who knows where.

“Yeah, good morning to you too,” I thought.

I had a feeling they were thinking ”He shouldn’t be there doing that, this is not a place for that kind of thing, interfering with our view on our morning bike ride! How dare he!” Ok, I was probably making quite an assumption about that, but my assumption was based on my intuition and my intuition was proved to be right as I shall go on to explain. But first...

It made me think about exactly what their problem was, and that, if they had a problem with me being there, why couldn’t they just politely express that problem and enquire (with honesty and integrity) about what I was doing? I would’ve been
more than happy to explain, and as I see it, if they were members of the English public then they would've had every right to be informed seeing as I was on public land. At least, I assumed that I was on public land. I knew most certainly I was on English land and I had a pretty good idea that I was, in fact, English (I've got a tattoo and everything to prove that. It must be true!). So why is it that an Englishman is no longer allowed (in the eyes of some) to sleep on his, and in his, own land?

It made me wonder once again about Brian and his protest in Parliament Square. No matter what the “authorities” attempted to impose with their legal “statutes”, in order to rid the country of an act of democracy, there appeared to be no law which prevented a peaceful man being on public land (his own land by right of birth) as long as he was creating no mischief and not disturbing the peace. In fact, a peaceful man has every right to do so!

And that is a right which is one of the fundamental foundations of England’s Common Law – The law of the land – every man, woman and child has the right to exist in peace, and without imposition or interference from anyone else, as long as their actions in life are not causing harm or are not mischievous in any way. Basically, you have a right to live, and seek a livelihood, so long as your actions are bound in respect for the land and for your fellow man (or woman).

This is what I stand under, and what I understand is that our Common Law is not a rigid set of rules and regulations, but a fluid means by which true justice can be implemented by the means of the precedents set by our ancestors and by what is viewed as fair and reasonable by our fellow men (and women).

It is principally the rule of the human heart – through the compassion and understanding of what is fair and reasonable in any given situation (or incident) encountered. This presides over the rigid and inhuman “one size fits all” rules that governments and local “authorities” attempt to impose which do not consider the context of any given situation, but rather (and inhumanly) just declare “This is the law, and we don’t have to justify it to you because we make the rule’s (up as we go along) and if you disobey them, then we will send you to prison (or fine you) for the crime of not living by the rules we have made up and for not doing as you’re told.”

No, the latter there is what is a called a “Statute”, it is an inhumane “Law of the Sea” (a “Maritime” law) that has no power over us unless we acquiesce to it and if we effectively choose to “stand under” it. The important thing to realise is that you do have a choice and that you don’t have to stand under anything that doesn’t feel right in your heart. And in effect, that is your right summed up.

To add, it is because of the imposition of the “Law of the Sea” upon the “Law of the Land” that there is a “Dock” in a “Court of Law” and many references to “ship” in legal language.

In that moment, I wondered if that was the reason why Brian was able to stay in Parliament Square and defend his freedom to do the RIGHT thing because he “understood” Common Law (the Law of the Land) and he did not “stand under” the
superficially imposed statutes which were the Law of the Sea. The fact is that we are all “Freemen” (and women) living on the land under Common Law. That is our right and we should not surrender it. I don’t think Brian did.

I finished packing everything into my backpack and surveyed the area. I had a carrier bag, containing all of my rubbish, and I systematically scanned the vicinity I had occupied for even the smallest piece of litter that I may have accidentally dropped or overlooked. I am meticulous like that. I really do like to leave a place exactly how I found it and take immense pride in doing so. The only trace that I usually leave (at a site where I have camped wild) is the bedded down grass, where my tent has been, and I always figure that that will perk up and recover by the end of the day. Sometimes I even like to think that if you bring with you positive energy, then you may even enhance the site at which you have stayed!

I raised my pack from the ground and fastened it to my back, taking one last look at the beautiful scene and turned to climb up the small grass embankment onto the path once more. I noticed that my feet were feeling amazingly good…

"It’s a miracle!" I thought to myself.

... and then considered that I may not have to phone my mum for a rescue mission, after all, as it appeared that I may be able to walk all the way to Canterbury in my Kibbutz shoes anyway. I felt quite positive about this development and began walking with a spring in my step.

A hundred or so yards further along I passed the man who I had seen earlier. He was sitting on a concrete construction of some type, by the river, and in full view of where I had been camping. I assumed that he’d been watching me and, as I came into eye contact with him, he smiled again and wished me a good morning. I dually returned the greeting and walked on.

“That was nice,” I thought.

A few minutes later I had finally reached Dartford Creek (and its barrier) which was in effect the mouth of the River Darrent into the Thames. “Great stuff,” I thought. I looked further down river, to take in the view, and I observed the traffic flowing over the Dartford Bridge in the distance. It was quite a milestone and I felt like I was now on the second leg of my journey - the River Darrent all the way to the Pilgrims Way at Otford.

I was a little bit confused at this point, because I had thought I’d be able to cross the Darrent by the barrier on the creek or that they’d be another means by which to cross in order to get on to the footpath (across the creek) which led directly into Dartford itself. Alas, I had no such luck and saw, from the map, that I was going to have to take a path which went on a long diversion bearing away from Dartford. I would then have to follow the main road back towards Dartford after which.

I said my “Bugger, buggers,” and reluctantly pursued this longer route.
“Lucky my feet are ok though,” I thought and continued on.

I was then presented with a gate across the path and the couple on the bikes (who I’d also seen earlier) were coming back the other way. I immediately thought that this was a chance to put my assumptions “to bed” and as they slowed down (to go through the gate) I allowed them unobstructed access while saying in my politest voice (and with a smile) “Good Morning.”

Do you know what they did? They completely blanked me, and, just so I knew that it wasn’t possible for them to have not heard me, I repeated “Good Morning,” just a touch louder. Do you know what they did this time? They both gave me an extremely “dirty” look and then rode off into the distance. “What a pair of awful and ignorant people they really were!” I thought. And then I chose to forget about the pair of plonkers!

Speaking of which...

... I was just at that point of beginning to notice that my feet were not quite as well healed as I’d earlier concluded and the very first sign of pain was beginning to manifest itself once more. I continued to walk on with increasing concern. As I persevered, I then noticed (on the other side of the river) a lot of noise, coming from engine’s revving, and then all of a sudden I saw a bunch of scrambler bikes flying into the air!

“My God,” I thought, “I was right last night... there was a motor cross track nearby that those youngsters could have been using! Those cheeky little bastards!” and then the thought came “Well, it probably wasn’t open at that time in the evening and no harm done.”

It was a strange thing to briefly watch from my position though. You couldn’t actually see the track itself, but just the bikes jumping into the air after they’d negotiated the ramps. It was pretty cool to watch and seemed like a lot of fun.

At that point, along the path, I was about 45 minutes to an hours walk away from the middle of Dartford Town Centre. The thing was, however, it never took me that long to reach there. It never took me anywhere near that long in fact, because from that moment on my feet descended into abysmal agony and I went on to experience the worst continuous pain I have ever encountered in all of my life.

Within ten minutes my feet, from a position of feeling reasonable comfortable, descended into acute and excruciating pain, to a point where I could only take a few steps at a time and had to keep resting. The damage happened so quickly and it felt as if my feet had been suddenly “ripped to shreds”. There was no way to alleviate the pain and no chance of rescue. I thought this was game over, well and truly, but I had to get to Dartford regardless.

There was nothing else I could do... except to keep going. I had no choice, and I thought about nothing else along this section of my pilgrimage apart from finding a bin for my rubbish, getting to Dartford and making a phone call to my Mum. I felt no
misery during this period, or even any loss of motivation. I didn’t need to give myself a beating. It just wasn’t necessary. I was on auto pilot and I felt completely numb. It took me almost two and a half hours to reach Dartford town centre, and it was a time that I prefer to forget.

I arrived by the side of The Railway Hotel, at Dartford train station, by about 12.30pm. It was mentally hot by this time. Absolutely mental hot! You know... hot enough to drive you mental! I was sweating buckets and the last effort to get up the small hill (that the station resided upon) really took it out of me. The sweat was not only dripping from my brow, but it was also dripping from the ends of my fingertips!

I was glad that there were stairs leading up the hill because it allowed me to place my feet squarely on each step as I raised my weight (and backpack) to the top, rather than my feet being on the angle of the slope which would have meant them suffering further friction inside of my shoes and “ripping up” even more.

I had decided that the station would be the best place to head for, in order to make my phone call, as I figured that if a rescue party could come then the station would be the easiest place to find and park at. I found a phone box, dumped my backpack from my shoulders and drank the remaining drops of the water I had left. I withdrew some coins from my pocket and pressed some numbers on the dial...

“Burr Burr...... Burr Burr...... Burr Burr” (that’s the British ring tones... it wasn’t me crying!)

My mum answered and I explained the situation. It was Sunday afternoon and she didn’t mind helping out. I really thought it was game over, but decided to let my mum bring my proper hiking shoes so that I could at least see how my feet felt in them, and if the pain was still too bad after that then I would just catch a lift back to Barking with her. It wasn’t that I felt like giving up at that point, it was just that it felt impossible for me to continue. My Israeli work shoes had almost completely disabled me through sheer pain. My Mum said that she had some orthopaedic pads somewhere and that she could bring them too. She also said that it was going to take a little while for her to get organised and so I had at least an hour or so to pass.

Well, in moments like that there is only one place you can go... and that’s the pub!

I picked my backpack up and sauntered (yeah right!) over to The Railway Hotel (which was close by and on the hill of the station). There were not many people inside and all the doors were open to let a very welcome (and cooling) draft circulate. I hobbled up to the bar and dumped my backpack down again. The barmaid gave me a look as if to say “What the...” and I immediately said “Don’t ask,” as I pre-empted her questioning expression with an answer.

“Could I have a big pint of water please? You know, one of your biggest. The biggest pint you have... about that big,” I said while demonstrating the size I was after with my hands held out wide and vertically apart!
She smiled and I continued “And then can I have a proper pint? One that’s extremely cold.”

She laughed, and then went on to pour me the drinks without further ado. I usually like to drink a fine English Ale when I go into a pub, but today was just too hot for that and so I opted for a lager. They had a big screen in the pub too and I remembered that the Formula One was on today. It was almost one o’clock and so I asked if it was possible for the race to be put on the large screen. The barmaid happily obliged and switched off the music in order to fulfil my request.

“Top drawer,” I thought “That was nice of her and it’ll keep me entertained for the next couple of hours.”

The Railway Hotel had the feel of a city pub about it and I was already collecting a few peculiar stares from one or two of the locals present. I don’t think pilgrims were very regular there, so it was nice to be able to have the excuse of some sport to watch, rather than to be sitting on my own, twiddling my thumbs, and looking even more conspicuous. I collected my drinks, expressed my gratitude and then found a nice table to sit at.

“Ah mate,” I thought to myself “What a morning!”

I really needed to take my shoes off and city pub or not… I just did it! I pulled back my socks, to inspect my feet, and they were red raw and blistering, though once again, there were no breakages in my skin. How lucky was that? I thought that maybe I wasn’t “out of the game” just yet and I was interested to see what my feet would feel like in my hiking shoes.

I sat back, relaxed and waited for the Grand Prix to start. I actually felt quite comfortable sitting there and a couple of laps after “Go, Go, Go” my mind started to wander. It was quite nice (and peaceful) just sitting over a beer. It was ok too, because the great thing with Formula One these days is - as long as you see the beginning and the end of the race... you’ve pretty much seen it all! So I didn’t feel like I was missing out on anything as my mind drifted away!

Just before the race came to its conclusion my “angel” appeared through the pub door. I waved her over and was pleased to see her. She had my hiking shoes and also the orthopaedic sticky foot pads she spoke about. She explained (after exchanging the shoes):

“Here’s those pads too,” she said while handing them to me.

“Ah Mum, you shouldn’t have. What are they?” I asked, looking at the box inquisitively.

“They’re the orthopaedic pads I said about. My shoe was rubbing about six weeks ago and I got them by mistake. I thought they were corn pads,” she explained.

“What’s the difference?” I asked.

“These ones you can cut to the size you want. Oh... and I got two boxes,” my Mum said while materialising another box from the bag.

“What? Why did you buy two boxes?” I said, genuinely thinking she was a muppet!
“I just had a feeling at the time, thought they were going to come in handy. Why? Do you want me to take one back then?” she said jokingly.

“No, No!” I said very quickly “You absolute diamond Mum! What are the odds!”

I took the pads out of the box and had a look at them. They were perfect, they were absolutely perfect, and exactly what I needed in that moment. They were extremely thick, and very soft pads, which you could literally cut to shape and then stick to the sole of your feet exactly where you wanted them to be. I wouldn’t have even thought about getting something like that, in fact, I didn’t know something like that even existed!

In that moment I knew that I could do this, that I could complete the pilgrimage no matter what, and that I was going to - no matter what! I looked at my Mum and I thought “You Angel... you absolutely beautiful Angel.” She had just saved me. I’m telling you, she saved me and if wasn’t for her having that intuition six weeks before then this pilgrimage (that you are reading about right now) would have never been finished. It was that significant.

There was also something else I experienced in that moment too. So many times in my life I have felt completely alone. So many times I have been in situations where I was trying to do the right thing but was surrounded by people, without understanding, who were attempting to bring me down, trying to topple me and kick my legs from under me. And it’s a tough fight when you feel isolated and alone. You get through it, you stand after being knocked down and you continue in your attempts to do the right thing, no matter what. But it’s hard. It’s heart breaking at times and it is difficult. At least I’ve found it to be difficult, I won’t lie.

But this was one of those rare and inspiring moments when I felt the support from someone who understood, someone who not only wanted me to succeed, but was willing me to. And that feeling was even more powerful because it was from the person who had stood by me in life more than any other and it was from the person I loved the most. There was no way I was going to fail. Not now. Not ever.

My Mum changed the direction of my life in that moment. That’s what love can do.

“Do you want a drink, Mum?” I asked.

“No, I’ve got to get back. Dave’s outside in the car and he’s been busy in the garden,” she explained.

I thanked my Mum profusely and we said our goodbyes (again!) before she went to rejoin her partner (in the car) and head back to Barking. There were a few laps of the Grand Prix left and it was still far too hot outside to even consider moving on yet. There was only one thing for it then - another pint of beer! And so I headed back to the bar (in my socks!) for a pint of water closely followed by an ice-cold pint of “pig’s ear”! Life’s not such a bad thing at times!

The race had ended, the hottest part of the day had passed and so I felt that it was time for me to start making tracks again. I got out my Swiss Army knife (or
rather my “multi-purpose knife” made by High-Gear!) and began to start cutting some of the pads into shape. I was in the middle of the pub, but what could I do? People just had to deal with it! The orthopaedic pad was too thick for my (multi-
purpose knife) scissors to cut through and so I attempted to slice through it with the knife itself. This was proving to be very difficult too.

“Blimey, these pads are good quality,” I thought.

I dampened a tissue, wiped my feet over and then took a look at the bottom of my heels before I attached the pads. I was really concerned about them because I thought that by continuing I could have been risking developing a pressure sore. The middles of both heels were white and the area marking the perimeter of the oval blisters were very red.

I pressed the perimeter area down to check for blood flow and sure enough the red area went white, before returning red again, after the pressure was released. They were ok, for now, but I knew that I would have to keep a close eye on them. I cut a square pad for each heel and a rectangle for both of the balls of my feet. I then replaced the plasters on the backs of my heels and around my little toes.

“Right then, the moment of truth,” I thought, before reaching for my hiking shoes. I put them on, and, what a difference!

“Those bloody Israeli shoes!” I thought.

What a 24 carrot muppet I really had been. Steve Martin had a lot to answer for! They had been alright in Israel (the work shoes). In fact, they’d been excellent during my travels around Israel, Palestine and the Middle-East. I had actually loved them. But that had been getting on for twenty years before. I had the thought that maybe all this had happened for a reason anyway. Maybe they were holier than holy shoes after all. They certainly had given me a test... and I hadn’t surrendered.

I wandered over to the bar, in order to get my water bottles re-filled, and my feet felt fairly reasonable (all things considered). My heels were still extremely painful, but the pain felt “doable”, if you know what I mean. The barmaid kindly refilled my water bottles and looked at me.

“What are you doing then?” she asked.

“I’m on the way to Canterbury. I’m doing a pilgrimage would you believe?” I replied.

“In this heat, are you mad!” she exclaimed.

“I think maybe I am...and if I’m not...I think I’m probably gonna be!” I answered. She laughed again and seemed to like me. “Nice looking girl,” I thought!

“We don’t normally get people like you in here,” she said.

“Well, maybe you’ll get some more sometime!” was all I could think to reply. She returned my bottles and wished me good luck. I thanked her and continued on my way.

“That was nice,” I thought.
Ok, I’m sure that by now you have completely had enough of hearing about the trials and tribulations of my feet! No problem whatsoever, because (and to be quite frank) I’ve had enough of writing about them myself!!! So, from now on, can we take it as read that I continued in bearable intense pain throughout the rest of this day, but it was a pain that was gradually subsiding (due to the fact that my feet were no longer being damaged in the footwear I was wearing and I was taking good care of them) and that this subsidence continued throughout the rest of my Pilgrimage, until a point where I was only experiencing mild discomfort by the time I reached Canterbury.

Is that cool? I’m sure you’re relieved. I am, and was!!! Just so you wont miss them, however, my feet will make the odd cameo appearance in places during the rest of this account, but (and I want to make this absolutely clear!) they are no longer going to be the stars of the show! They’ve done very well, but enough is enough! Crystal? Is that all gravy? Sorted! Thanks very much!!!

Dartford Town Centre, I was surprised to discover, was actually very nice. I’d always imagined that it would be quite a rundown place, but I found it to be quite pleasant. There was a good array of shops (which again surprised me because of the proximity of the Blue Water and Lakeside shopping centres) and some picturesque buildings. I continued on, into what was Central Park, and reacquainted myself with the River Darrent.

It was an amazing scene throughout the park. It was completely filled with families (and extended families with friends) having picnics together and playing family games of rounder’s and cricket. There was a “wet play” area (with no paddling pool!) that was jam packed. Although it looked like a great facility, it didn’t seem right without a pool though and especially on a day such as this. I thought “Those “no win, no fee” lawyers have got a lot to answer for - spoiling everyone’s fun!” and then “I suppose it’s not all the councils fault for this “health and safety gone mad” state of affairs. Unenlightened people who are not prepared to take responsibility for themselves (and their actions) have to shoulder some of the blame too!”

I was getting some strange looks as I was ambling through the park, laden with my backpack, in the 30 plus degree heat. One bloke even said to me:

“It’s too hot for that mate,” and then smiled at me.

He was right, it was, and I needed another break (I told you my heels were still hurting!), so I found a nice bench by the river (under a tree in the shade) and had a bite to eat. I continued to do a bit of people watching and felt a sense of contentment and happiness. I’ve never seen a town park so well used before and I didn’t realise that English working class families still had days like these together. They certainly didn’t in Barking, at least, not from my experience.

I resumed walking, now on the River Darrent Valley Path proper, and left the confines of the park to head out into open countryside. Finally, I was leaving the
extremities of the city and would soon be outside of the M25. The path leading away from Dartford, and towards South Darenth, was attractive in places, but a bit unkempt in others. I thought “That’s all that could be expected on a country path so close to human conurbations.”

Between South Darenth and Farningham the path hugs the river and there are some beautiful places. At one point I stopped for another break, taking off my shoes and placing them in the shallow water of the river. It was exceptional just sitting there, with my feet in the cooling water, while the early evening sun broke through the canopy of the trees. It was just after 6pm and there were still a number of families walking along the path and making the most of the wonderful weather.

I took my book out and began to read, pausing occasionally to say hello to people as they passed. Every now and then an uncontrollable dog would run into the shallow water in front of me and splash me from head to toe. “Oh you little bastard,” I would think, and then allow myself a little giggle at my disabled predicament and my absolute inability to move out of the way! On one occasion a dog (which was soaking wet as it had obviously just been for a swim in the deeper water further along) stopped right in front of me. I knew what was coming next, it was obvious, and so I stood up, but because of all the stones on the river bed I couldn’t run for cover. And then the inevitable happened...

Shake, shake, shake, shake, shake, shake...

All over me! All over my backpack, my clothes and my book!!! “Oh, you little bastard!” I thought, and then the owner came over to apologise quite profusely.

“It’s ok,” I said as I began to dry myself. What else could I say? That I hated their bloody dog?!?! Well, to be honest, I actually didn’t... I just found it to be highly irritating and extremely impolite!!!

I cleaned myself up, dried my book off and tried to see the funny side (Err... nah, there wasn’t one!). I resettled myself, in order to start reading again, as I was quite enjoying the moment before my impromptu shower. A father turned up, wading through the river, with his two daughters. They appeared to be having quite a nice time investigating the rock pools and the like. They paddled in the area nearby to me for a while and it was very relaxing to observe their “family” time for that brief period. The whole world seemed to be in “happy family” mode that day and it was absolutely marvellous to behold.

Begrudgingly, after an hour or so of being there, I forced myself to get up and move on. The water had cooled me down considerably and the evening was perfect in its ambience. I followed the path along the river and crossed under the M25. It felt like quite a solemn place and the river took on the form of a canal for the under section, but the greenness of the landscape really started to open out afterwards. I was feeling more and more like I was finally in the tranquillity of the countryside.
I arrived in Farningham at a time just before 8pm and walked past a pub which had many people standing outside. They all seemed to be having a nice time and appeared quite taken aback to see me sauntering by. I nodded to say hello, but no one returned the greeting. I really needed to find a shop, in order to get some supplies, but it was too late in the day to expect a village shop to be open. Further along the road I stopped a gentleman to ask if a petrol station was nearby. He said yes and gave me directions, which took me back past the pub again.

I have to admit, I felt a bit embarrassed passing by once more because everyone was looking at me and it must have appeared to them that I was lost! I persisted with a friendly greeting again, but only received “peculiar” stares in return.

“You mug,” I said to myself and thought that when I walked past them on my return I wouldn’t “mug myself off” anymore by saying hello!

I found the service station and was forced to pay almost one whole English pound for a pint of milk... yes, you did read that correctly – One Whole English Pound! What liberty takers! That’s all I bought and I got the hell out of there before finding a tap to refill my water bottles...

(the litre bottle which I hold as I walk and two 1.5 litre bottles that I carry in my backpack - four litres in total and just less than one gallon - which I find strikes the right balance between having enough water to prevent me from running out too soon and not having too much weight to carry)

... I retraced my steps back past the pub, through Farningham, and then took a left turn into a lane to follow the trail towards Eynsford.

This section of the path was so very beautiful in the evening sun and I really felt that I was now completely in the countryside. There was a choice to either follow the lane towards Eynsford Castle or take the path behind a hedgerow marking the boarder of a field to the lane. I opted for the latter and was so very pleased with my decision. The Kentish Hills were laid out before me and I could see right along the small valley. The blue skies persisted and the sun was still warm, only now it was very comfortably and soothingly so.

It had passed 8.30pm, which meant that I was now in “wild camp search mode”. The section I was on was too exposed to consider and so I carried on until I came across a bench (by what looked like a little tree nursery) and I decided that it was time for another break. I sat there, soaking up the last of the day’s sun rays, and was unwilling to move. I was knackered. Absolutely “cream crackered”. I hadn’t walked far that day, maybe only a third of the distance I had done so the day before, but the heat had taken its toll on me - not to mention my... cameo double act now sporting hiking shoes!

“Come on,” I thought to myself “Got to keep going.”

Up I got, and onwards I went, passing Eynsford Castle before coming to the Lullingston Road and cutting across a field. I saw a beautiful viaduct in the near
distance and immediately thought “This is it. This is me for tonight, somewhere around here.” That particular field was once again, too exposed, but after crossing the railway track I discovered an amazing poppy field. I left the path and went up to the brow of the hill and... Oh my God... I was there! The place wasn’t just top drawer... it was on top of the chest of drawers! I found my spot, took off my backpack and sat down to enjoy the scenery.

Before me lay a sea of beautifully red vibrant poppies which were, in turn, surrounded by hillsides (going off into the distance of my near panoramic view) covered by numerous deep green hedgerows, encompassing the same beautifully red vibrant fields, mixed in with a patchwork of the finest golden barley. The sun was lowering in the light blue sky and in all of my life, and in all of my travels around this beautiful little Island that I am so privileged to call my home, I have never beheld such a glorious and exquisite sight.

“If I was John Constable,” I thought “I would’ve painted that!”

I had maybe an hour of daylight left, which was perfect because (when camping wild) you really want to be setting up camp during the last moments of the evening and moving on during the first moments of the morning. It just reduces the chance of any “irate” person (who may or may not be coming along) discovering you and deciding to off-load their “irateness” on to you! I also see it as a mark of respect and a statement to any landowner (you may be taking a slight liberty with by staying on their land) that you are only staying for as long as is your need and for no longer than you have to. At least this is how I view and define it.

There were some houses a little way away, across on the other side of the train line, and so I pitched my tent behind some hawthorn (that was growing nearby) in order to obscure me from their view. I’m sure the house owners wouldn’t have wanted to see me through their living room window, on their Sunday evening, while they were enjoying their next instalment of Midsomer Murders!

Once done, I felt comfortable that I had the “world” to myself and that I would not disturbed, or be disturbed, by anyone. It was time to conduct my evening routine of lighting my meth’s burner (to start my dinner cooking) and settling into my tent (by preparing my bedding). All was achieved, to a tight and efficient schedule, and I was sitting eating my pasta within 15 minutes.

It was lovely sitting there, at peace and with only my own thoughts, as the world began to descend into night. Every now and then a train would pass by and I found it to be quite good company. I know that sounds like a strange thing to say, but I can only express the sensation. The noise from the train (and the feeling of people being on it) made it feel like I had a companion for the evening. Peculiar hey!

I finished dinner and then washed up. The light was just right for a shower and so I stripped off and completed my evening ritual (using my litre bottle of water with a sports cap).

I find that one litre of water is just enough with which to wash properly and I have developed an effective and efficient system in order to do so. I basically wash
my hair first (while I’m standing) and then work my way down. It could best be summarised as heads, shoulders, knees and toes... with that bit in the middle... being washed in the middle! It works for me and I always feel very refreshed afterwards, like all the shit from the day has been washed away.

I then put on my sleeping attire - which consists of some light cotton “safari” type trousers and a long sleeved t-shirt. I like to sleep wearing those items for two reasons. Firstly, it helps with the regulation of my temperature at night – if it’s cold, then it keeps me a bit warmer, and if it’s too hot, then I can sleep without any covers at all and those little insect things (that appear to be everywhere!) still can’t bite you! Secondly, if you are “caught short” during the night, or if someone does disturb you, you can deal with the situation with the benefit of your complete dignity, instead of having to be standing there in just your boxer shorts!

The sun had now gone down and the stars were beginning to shine in the clear night sky. There was a little bit of a chill in the air and so I got into bed, sitting up and absorbing the peace. I wasn’t feeling at all tired by then. I’d had a “second wind” and actually didn’t want to go to sleep. I found my little transistor radio and I started playing with the tuning dial in order to find a station I liked. The reception wasn’t very good on the music stations I found and so I thought I’d check out BBC Radio 2 and BBC Radio 4 to see if there was any comedy on.

I went on to remember back when I was on the Offa’s Dyke trail the year before. I was camped by the foot of the Black Mountains, with Miriam, and I happened to stumble across Rhod Gilbert doing some stand up on a Radio 2 evening show. I’d caught him at the beginning of a rant about going into a supermarket to buy a jacket potato for his dinner, but discovering that he could only buy them in packs of two (encapsulated in cellophane and on a tray). I started to recall some of his gags (during the routine) and how he confronted the manager to ask why he couldn’t buy just one potato!

He asked and the manager said “Because that’s just the way they come,” and Rhod Gilbert said in reply “No they don’t. You did that. Potato’s come in ones... it’s one potato, two potato, three potato, four... not... two potato, four potato, six potato, eight!!!” and he then continued “What’ll happen if I split them?” and the manager replied “You’ll be arrested,” and Rhod Gibert then said “And charged with what... separating potato’s?!!!”

I couldn’t remember all of the rant because if you’ve ever seen or heard Rhod Gilbert live you’ll know that you hardly have a chance to recover from his first line of hysterical recounts before he’s on to the next! He’s a Welshman and he’s amazing! (Is that a possible?!!!) He starts off with the absurd and snowballs into a crescendo of the truly farcical!!! It is all so true, and so wonderfully observed, and I think that’s also why I like him so much because he highlights the ridiculous and has a word about it!
The memory of that routine just cracked me up! I started creasing up and proper laughing to myself. Sitting there in my tent, on my own, and in a poppy field! Like I said, I couldn’t remember everything he said, but the bits that I did set the tone for my hysterical mood, and it was more of the memory of it being funny… that made it so funny!

I then remembered another bit where Rhod described how the manager said “You don’t understand Sir, the tray protects the potatoes,” and Rhod replied “What do you mean it protects the potatoes? It protects them from what? Are there people out there that actually want to harm my potato?!!!”... Well, you can only imagine where his rant went from there and I was in bits at the thought!

I composed myself and then I found the BBC stations, but there was nothing on that appealed to me and so I continued with my search. I was intrigued to find a couple of American stations and also a couple of Christian ones, but the sum of the stations only amounted to three because one of the stations was Christian and American! I tried each of them out, for a few minutes (they were all close to one and other on the dial), and then opted to listen to the English Christian one (seeing as that I was on a pilgrimage and that I was in fact... in England!).

Now, I don’t know what it was, and I think that it may very well have been because I was still recovering from the Rhod Gilbert memories, but I happened upon a Christian “Agony Uncle” phone-in, whereby a priest was there to take peoples calls on their relationship issues and then offer some advice. This seemed all well and good, and I thought that it’ll be interesting to hear what the Churches take on these kinds of issues would be. In any instance, I thought it’d be better than Ricky Lake!

So, as I listened, the first person called in, and spent five minutes bearing her soul to the priest, explaining her predicament and asking for his guidance on what she should do to resolve her issue. All the way through the priest was making those compassionate overtone noises across the airwaves and I’m sitting there thinking about this lady’s problem and considering the advice I would give to her in order to help her come to a resolution... as you do in those moments (well, at least that’s what’s I do... I’m not alone in doing that am I?!!!).

As you would expect, and because of the depth of my attention, I was very interested to learn what the priest would say, being a man of the cloth as he was. She finished her story and the priest hesitated, and then he paused, and then he said “Well... what I really think you should do in this situation is to pray. Pray to God and he will answer your prayers... I hope that’s of help,” and he finished.

“Hang on!” I thought “What just happened there? Did I just miss something?”

The lady appeared to be ever so pleased with the advice and thanked the priest profusely. There was me thinking of all the practical, psychological and emotionally supportive advice I could think of, to help her get through her situation, and the answer was praying all along! Obviously praying helps in any situation, but I thought she might have already known that before she phoned in! Didn’t she expect a bit more? Obviously not, what did I know?!
There was a commercial break and then another caller came on to describe his plight, and again, to gain some helpful advice. The same process ensued and, once more, I thought about the problem and the advice I would give to the fellow. The description of his difficulty came to its conclusion and once again there was a pause from the priest before he began...

“Well,” he said “What I think you should do is pray, pray to God for forgiveness and he shall answer your prayers.”

“What!?” I thought “Are you having some kind of “bubble bath” mate? You’ve got to give the geezer more than that. Surely?!” and then I said out loud “Blimey, you’re having a “bubble” mate!” and I began to laugh to myself!

And that’s what I seriously thought. The fellow described this really deep problem, that he’d had with the relationship with his father, and wanted to know what he could do to best resolve it. The advice he received wasn’t about going to talk to his father about the problem, or even writing a letter to communicate how he felt and to say sorry for anything he had done, it was just (and quite simply) to pray. Once again the fellow was extremely grateful for the advice and, to all intense and purposes, sounded as pleased as punch! Was I missing something here?

There was another commercial break and another bloke then came on with his problem and asked the priest for guidance and advice. To be honest, I didn’t even bother considering the problem this time. I was just all ears to find out what the advice would be. The bloke came to the end of his explanation and we awaited the words of the priest. “Well,” he said...

And you know what I was thinking in that moment of imminent revelation, don’t you? “You’re gonna tell him to pray aren’t you... go on say it! Go on... tell him that praying’s the answer... go on... tell him!” I thought with much enthusiastic and expectant anticipation. And then I heard...

…”What I really think you should do is pray,” the Priest delivered, perfectly and right on cue!!! I cracked up and I was in bits!!! I really couldn’t help myself, it tickled me to pieces it did. I missed what the bloke’s reaction was, but judging by the last two callers I’m sure he was over the moon with the advice given too. The next thing I knew the news was on and the programme was over. I took that as a sign that it was time for me to go to bed, so I switched off the radio and tucked myself in.

I know I’m going to hell for admitting that, but it was the truth. I’m likewise sorry if I’ve (unintentionally) offended any Christians during the process of being truthful here, but come on... come on?! The guy had to do better than that didn’t he? Surely he did... surely?! Those poor people - with their stories - you can’t tell me that if you go live on the radio and present yourself as an “agony uncle type” then that’s all you have to do. Can you?... Can you? Maybe I’m wrong, maybe all that those people wanted (and needed) was someone to listen to them and to tell them that everything was going to be ok. The callers certainly all sounded pleased and grateful
for the advice that they had received. What did I know?! But I reserve the right to find it funny though, because in effect, it was. There was no getting away from it, not for me anyway, and certainly not after a Welshman called Rhod Gilbert had just played a "stand-up comedy gig" live in my head!!!

I tried to get some shut eye, but I found that I just couldn’t stop giggling to myself. So I put the radio back on and managed to tune into a music station that was audible. I had been laying there for about 45 minutes when I heard footsteps outside. I quickly unzipped my tent and poked my head out to see who it might be and, right before me, was a man standing with a double-barrelled shot gun!

“Fucking hell!” I thought!

“Oh, it’s a tent!” he exclaimed “I wondered what the bloody hell that was,” he said in a calm and surprised voice.

“Sorry Sir, I’m only here for the night, I’m hiking to Canterbury,” I said politely.

“Oh that’s ok. I heard the music and wondered what it was, that’s all,” he said.

“Is this your land? Is it ok for me to stay here?” I immediately questioned.

“No, it’s not my land. I’m just out shooting rabbits and foxes for the farmer. He should be out later too, he said he would be, but you’re fine where you are. I’m sure he won’t have a problem. Hang on, I’ll text him and see,” he informed me, then took out his mobile phone and began to send a text.

“Thank you,” I said “I thought I was well out of the way here, I didn’t expect to see anyone.”

He sent the text and replied “Well, it’s only because I’m out shooting tonight. It’s lucky I saw you, but you are in a good spot, whatever you do in the future don’t camp in dips or in places that are not obvious to the eye, you’ll end up getting shot!”

“Mate, I was aware of that and I’m always pretty careful, but thanks again for letting me know. It’s a good reminder!” I said quite relieved.

We went on to have a chat and he told me a bit about Kent, and the local area, and I told him about some of the experiences I had camping wild along the Offa’s Dyke trail. The conversation ended by him saying he had to be off and he checked his phone for a reply (from the farmer who owned the land).

“Nah... he’s not replied, he’s probably asleep and not coming out tonight then. You’ll be ok here though, I’ll make sure I don’t shoot this way,” he said with an air of seriousness in his voice.

“Ah thanks!” I said, with an air of “Thank fuck for that,” in mine.

We bided our farewells and wished each other a goodnight, by which time I was ready to sleep. I turned off my radio, settled back into my bed and smiled to myself.

“What an evening!” I thought, and then I got some Zed’s.
Below Left: Dartford Bridge and the mouth of Dartford Creek (River Darrent)
Below Right: Dartford Barrier

Below Left: The Railway Hotel at Dartford Railway Station
Below Right: Dartford Town Centre

Below Left: The River Darrent through Central Park
Below Right: The pub in Farningham High Street
Above Left: The path towards Eynsford
Above Right: The Viaduct at Eynsford

Above Left: Second night’s camp site
Above Right: The field that was full of poppies
Day 3 – Monday 27th June, 2011

I arose to the sound of bird song and some intense heat in my tent. I was already sweating and I hadn’t even walked anywhere yet! I unzipped the tent and took a look at the world. Beautiful! How exceptional was that? The view didn’t have the mystique of the evening before, because the light was different, but it did look so much more vibrant because of the brighter rays of light from the sun.

I got my arse in gear and set to implementing stage one of my morning routine – night clothes off, walking clothes on, burner on (water boiling), wash, brush teeth, prepare muesli, water boiled (burner off ), Earl Grey made – lovely jubbily!!!

I sat down to enjoy my cup of “rosey”, and consume my muesli, while taking in the beauty of the world around me. The sun was very hot, even at a time before 9am, and I actually began to feel quite uncomfortable in the heat.

I made breakfast a short one and then started to implement stage two of my morning routine – tent condensation wiped dry, bedding packed, utensils washed (and packed), toiletries packed, sundries packed, tent dried, tent dismantled (and packed), litre bottle replenished with water, sun cream on, scan area for any missed litter – job done, ready to go!

I took one last look at the view (as is my way) and then ambled down the side of the hill to rejoin the track that was the Darrent Valley Path. I carried on along the path and entered another field which was full of poppies, at waist height, throughout. The path went through the middle of them and I continued to walk, and then stop, and then walk, and then stop, throughout. One reason for this was so that I could take in the splendid scenery that surrounded me and the other was that I had to get my “plates of meat” in gear (Ok, just to let you know, I’m now going to try and stop using the word “feet”. I’ve had enough of writing that four letter word and it’s time it stopped hogging the limelight! We’ll see how I do!), as they were a touch on the tender side and rebelling against being used that morning.

I noticed some ladies walking along behind me and when they reached me we said our “hello’s” and I then joined them on their walk for a short period of time. We spoke, and I discovered that they lived locally, but that they were not locals as they had moved to the area. They said that they loved living around these parts and especially on days like today. They were out on their morning “power walk” and they were walking a bit too fast for me! All I could do was plod and I had no choice. We came to a bit of a viewpoint, and stopped, when I decided to ask about all the poppies in the fields.

To be honest, I firstly questioned whether or not I had identified the flowers correctly (because I was confused and thought poppies were illegal to grow) and the ladies went on to inform me that I was correct in my assertion. They were indeed poppies, and apparently they were all growing wild in the fields that the farmers had left fallow.
“Blimey,” I thought “How beautiful.”

The ladies pressed on and left me taking in the view by myself. It was gorgeous! I carried on and at some point shortly afterwards (I cannot remember exactly when or where for some reason) I entered a field which was one of golden barley...

.... As I walked along, I happened to see a bumble bee fly across my path from right to left. “How lovely,” I thought. I then looked up, and across the barley field, and in the distance I saw a bird fly from left to right. Something strange happened to me in that moment and I all of a sudden I felt very light (and a bit removed). I then went on to experience what I can only describe as an epiphany.

After taking in what I had just seen, I suddenly thought about the true nature of life itself and how wonderfully complex, yet simple, it is. I thought how beautiful it was that everything had a place, and that everything had found its place, and that this had all happened without anyone telling anything what to do. I thought that if you said to someone that you were going to organise life so that all people depended on each other, and also lived in balance with each other, and that you wouldn’t actually have to organise anything because all this would just occur naturally and everything and everyone of them would just “find their place” or “fall into their place” then that someone would call you a nutter!!!

They’d say “Impossible, something like that could never happen, you’re a mental case mate. You’re some kind of fantasist and idealist. You could never do something like that. Things would have to be organised or the whole world would just fall apart. You’d need to invent a system, so that everyone would know what they should be doing and when they should be doing it, or it’ll just be chaos and fighting!”

Well, in that moment I realised, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that it was possible for everyone to live in harmony with each other and without some kind of fascist control system dictating every aspect of their lives on the premise of creating “security”. And do you know why? Because it’s already happened and the “impossible” has been proved possible by the very thing that the “human control system” is systematically destroying – Mother Nature and the natural way of things!!! The natural world never craves “security”, it just takes each day as it comes and goes with the flow of life.

And I had that realisation just after I saw a bird and a bee, flying across a field, in the Garden of England. I couldn’t make that up, and if I did, then you wouldn’t believe me.

It reminded me of a conversation I’d had (which turned quite heated) just a couple of months before. I was sitting around a dining table with four people (all of which worked for the National Health Service). They were all good people and kind of heart. One was a Doctor, one was a Psychiatric Nurse and the remaining two both worked in NHS Administration. We’d all had quite a number of glasses of wine, so you may forgive me if I cannot recall every word that was said with a degree of certainty, but
the conversation concerned the amount of ridiculous diktats and bureaucracy the Government imposed on them and how it prevented them from doing their jobs effectively.

They all complained profusely about how, because of all the ludicrous interference from the Government, they were unable to give people the care that they felt was their duty to do, and deliver it to the quality to which they desired. They understood the need for some centralised control, but were aghast about how far that control had now reached. They shared numerous examples of their day to day experience’s, which illustrated the nonsense they were having to deal with (in order to keep their funding and their employment) and dually commiserated with each other, while seriously considering leaving the National Health Service altogether.

Imagine that, four intelligent and quality people, who the National Health Service and it’s user’s desperately needed, wanting to leave the profession they loved being a part of because of the heartless “system”. I didn’t partake in the conversation, but just listened for a time of twenty minutes or so. I didn’t say one word, I just observed, because this was the same conversation I’d heard people having, in all walks of life, doing all kinds of jobs (and in every sector), all over the world, whereby the “State” had them by the proverbial “bollocks” and was forcing them to do things that they felt were wrong.

And, quite frankly, I’d had enough of hearing it. So I “piped up”.

“So why don’t you just stop participating with the nonsense?” I asked “Why don’t you just carry on doing your jobs, but stop doing anything they ask you to do that you feel and think is wrong?”

I was told that that was impossible and that the only thing to do was to change the system from the inside. I was then given a couple of examples of how they were attempting to bend certain rules in order to do that. I explained that the system hadn’t been designed to be changed, it had been designed to wear you down into submission (and that’s exactly what it was doing!) and that whatever you participate in, you give your power to, so either stop participating with the nonsense you’re complaining about or stop complaining about it.

Well, to be honest, that didn’t go down too good and a voice was raised at me, and rightly or wrongly (and being from Barking), I didn’t mind raising my voice back in response.

I then had it explained to me that we needed the ”system” or there would be chaos. I couldn’t believe it! The very people who had just spent about half an hour denigrating the ”system” were now defending it! I explained that I believed if everyone stepped out of the system, then there would indeed be chaos for a short period of time, but after that everyone would find their place quite naturally because that’s just how the Universe worked. I was then told that I didn’t understand, that I was an anarchist, that I was naïve and that I was an idealist.
Excuse me?
I didn’t understand? ... Were they having a “bubble bath”?
I was an anarchist?... Me? An anarchist? Not a chance on your nelly mate!
I was naïve?... Me? From the streets of Barking? They really were having a laugh!
I was an idealist?... Ok, point taken. I had no defence there!

   I justly defended myself against three of the accusations and then told them that I had managed to do exactly what I was preaching, and that I had been living through my heart and (as much as I could) outside of the system for over two years.
   I explained that it was possible to do - if you helped others and allowed others to help you - but the thing that made it difficult was not necessarily the system itself... but the people who constantly complied with the system! And, strangely enough, it was the people who complied with the “system” the most who were the very ones who also complained so bitterly about it!!!
   I was then informed that it was “easy” for me because I had nothing to lose. And that fucking pissed me off!!! I had nothing to lose?!!! How dare they make that dismissive presumption!!! Who were they to assume such a thing!!! I pointed out, in a raised voice, that I had, in fact, lost everything of my position and financial security because of the choices I had made!!! But I did not regret any of those choices because I had gained something even more precious and priceless... I had gained my freedom!!!
   Or at least as much freedom that is possible while everyone else chooses to participate in a system which “systematically” enslaves them and all those around them.
   I was then told to “Shut up... or go!!!” I chose to leave and I didn’t take offence. To be honest, I had gone a bit overboard with the raising of my voice and I could understand why they wanted me to “Shut up or go”. It was fair play and I have to admit - if I was them on the receiving end of me, then I would’ve probably told me to “Shut up or go” as well!!! But I was also so very glad that I said what I did. I had no regrets. I’d said the truth as I saw it, just a bit too loudly! But that’s what passion can do to you and it was something that had been on my chest for a while. We were all very civil to each other afterwards and I bade everyone a good night.

   The ironic thing is: when you eventually find the courage to let go of all the things you believe you need in your life, in order to make yourself feel comfortable and secure, you discover a comfort and security surpassing anything you could possibly imagine.

I honestly can’t remember the exact point on my pilgrimage where all that happened, and exactly when I had those thoughts. It’s an absolute peculiarity to me. At every other point along my path I can (amazingly) remember what I was thinking and the events that took place, in terms of circumstances, environments, encounters and conversations... apart from this one.
I am pretty sure, to a probability of about 85-90%, that this is where the moment took place, but if this was a Court of Law I couldn’t swear to it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Although the event itself (and the thoughts I had because of it) are very clear, the environment and circumstances leading up to (and after) it are quite hazy in my head. It’s like I only remember the moment… and that moment was not connected to anything else. It’s very strange and I also find it quite weird.

In the writing of this account, I was helped greatly in my recollection’s by the re-visiting of my path in order to take the photos to accompany the account, and maybe this is the place where I should explain how exactly the idea for this book came about.

On the day that the “Occupy” financial protest began at St. Paul’s Cathedral, in London, I had the feeling to go out and distribute copies of the first four pages of a Chapter called “The Debt Scam” in a wonderfully well researched book called “And the Truth Shall Set You Free” by David Icke.

I’d photo-copied and printed them off a few years before, and had been handing them out (at times when I have felt it was right to) ever since. The odd person has called me a nutter on the odd occasion (when I have done so) but on the whole (and most reassuringly) those who have accepted the copies (off of me to read) have been very grateful, with some even chasing me down the street after they have read the content to say “thank you” (and those are the most touching moments by the way, and the ones that let you know that no matter what the ignorant people say, you are most definitely doing the right thing).

On this day I took a route of walking (to hand out the copies) from Tower Hill, across Tower Bridge to the south embankment and all the way along the Thames to Westminster Bridge, stopping at Parliament Square before joining the protest at St. Paul’s Cathedral.

While in Parliament Square I took the opportunity to introduce myself to Barbara Tucker and say hello. After I had completed my Pilgrimage in July, I’d had a letter forwarded to the Loved Ones of Brian Haw (kindly by Linda, of David Ickes support team) explaining what I did, just so that they knew that it had been done and for no other reason. I didn’t know if Barbara had received the letter and so I just felt I should explain to her who I was and what I had done (in Brian’s Remembrance). Again, it was only to let her know that someone had cared enough to do it.

Barbara explained to me that she had received the letter and remembered thinking that it was such a lovely thing to do, but at the time (and understandably so) she had too much going on to reply. Babs then said that she was glad that she had now met me and asked if I had any pictures of the Pilgrimage so she could put them onto Brian’s website. I explained that I never travel with a camera, and so I didn’t have any pictures, and she looked slightly disappointed. I then added that I had all the maps, and that I could scan them and send them to her (for the route), and that I could even write a short account to accompany them. She seemed quite enthusiastic about the idea and so I made my promises to do so as soon as I could.
We spoke briefly about other matters and then I said my farewells and continued to go on to join the protest outside of St. Paul’s Cathedral.

In the days that followed, I had many thoughts about the promise I had made to Babs and was acutely aware that I could do much more than what I had agreed to do. I knew that the photos would play an important role in the telling of the pilgrimage account and so I decided that I would do a “Pilgrimage Re-visited” in order to take them.

I had met many kind people during my pilgrimage and so I also had the feeling that I would like to “re-visit” some of them too. And so, at the beginning of January, 2012, I set off on my “Pilgrimage Re-visited” (and laughed to myself at the thought that it sounded like a programme made by Channel 4!!!). I took photos of all the places that I felt were significant to my journey (and to my thoughts on that journey) and the process added greatly to the depth of the memories I recalled. It even added to them. I found that it was an exceptionally wise and positive thing to do as (during the process of retracing my steps) I recollected other things, which had occurred during my pilgrimage, that were significant, but had actually passed out of my short term memory.

After I returned, I went back to Parliament Square and spoke with Babs about it. I showed her the pictures, that I had taken, and I explained what I was thinking. The short account (that I had intended to write) had now become something more substantial because there was so much more that I remembered. I explained that during the process of the re-visiting, it had become very evident to me that the account (to accompany the pictures and the maps on Brian’s website) had become an entity which could stand in its own. It had, in effect, become a book. The book that you are now reading, and of which (and as I write), I am still not completely sure of the final destination.

Oh, Canterbury, wasn’t it?!?! That’s where it ends up! What a muppet! I had momentarily forgotten! I haven’t spoilt the ending for you have I?!?

Now where was I...

I had entered into Lullingstone Park and had lost track of designated Darrent Valley Path. I could see where I was on the map (in terms of the approximate field), but was beginning to get a bit frustrated because either the signage wasn’t very clear (for the Darrent Valley Path) or I had overlooked a sign post somewhere. I didn’t want to go back and retrace my steps (I was in “as little walking as possible” mode remember), but I also could see that the paths before me were not marked on my map (they must have been ones established by Lullingstone Park after my copy of the Ordinance Survey map was made) and so I didn’t know exactly where they would come out.

I trusted the old and ancient Anglo-Saxon wisdom of “following your nose” and took the path that appeared to be heading in the direction that I wanted to end up.
Part of the way along I saw a middle-aged gentleman, out for a stroll, and so I took the opportunity to ask him for directions in order to reassure myself.

“Excuse me, Sir. Does this path lead to Lullingstone Castle by any chance?” I enquired.

“Oh, err... well sort of. If you keep following it you’ll come to a path on the left. Don’t take that one, but take the next and I think that should bring you out near there,” he explained.

“Oh thank you,” I replied as I went to continue in that direction.

“You’re welcome,” he finished by saying, while setting off to walk a different way.

I followed the directions and somehow found myself on the edge of a golf course. I carried on, in the direction I was heading, and came to another junction (of the paths) where I (once again) wasn’t sure where to go. Just as I hesitated, and stopped to consult my map, I saw the same gentleman again as he came over the zenith of a mound a short distance away. I pointed to the path that I thought was the correct one (as way of a long distance questioning) and he held his thumb up (by way of a long distance reply). The path did indeed lead to a lane that connected to Lullingstone Castle and I was back on course again.

I needed to refill my bottles with water and I came across another couple of gentle man who were standing by a van in the lane. I thought that they may be connected to the park in some way and so I asked them if there was anywhere to refill my bottles. They said to try the castle, but if not then there was a National Trust place further along the path where I could probably do so. I thanked them and headed for the gatehouse of the castle.

There were signs outside of the building and I noted that Lullingstone Castle was open to the public (though not on that day). It was quite an impressive sight, with its fine red brickwork and elegant design. It was apparent to me that it was more of a country house than a proper castle and it seemed to have the air of “being open to the public in order to help fund its preservation” about it. I noted that it was home to some kind of “World Garden” and that that was its main feature.

There was a chain across the entrance of the Gatehouse and I cheekily went under it so that I could see if there was anyone in the courtyard for whom I could ask to gain some water (there was no one visible to me from my point of viewing outside). I peeked into the courtyard (going no further, so as not to cross the threshold of the gatehouse), but still there was no one in sight. I did see, to the right, a door to a public toilet and I thought “Fantastic, I should be able to fill up my water bottles in there somewhere.”

I decided to wait until I found someone to ask before I did so, as it didn’t feel right to go in without having permission. Luckily for me, and within five minutes or so, a lady did turn up and I politely asked her. She sounded quite “well to do” and explained that the castle wasn’t open to the public at the moment, but that she didn’t mind me using the toilet facility. She let me know that it was fine.

At that point I heard some laughter and became aware of a group of people
sitting on the roof terrace on the building of the main house, and on other side of
the courtyard. The kind lady saw me looking and volunteered “Oh, that’s Tom (I
think) and some friends having breakfast.” I remember thinking to myself how lovely
it must have been eating breakfast up there on that beautifully sunny morning... and
then I immediately countered the thought with the memory of my own breakfast...
and, to be honest, I knew exactly where I would have rather have been out of the
two places; and, given the choice, it was exactly where I had been and in the picture
that John Constable (so sadly) had never got to paint!

The Lady left me to my own devices and I was gutted to discover that the only
taps in the toilets were that on the hand basins. The angle in the sink was too tight
for me to fill up my bottles. “Bollocks!” I thought, but then remembered the National
Trust place that I’d been informed about further along. I left, mildly disappointed,
but with a sense of harmony because the Lady had been so pleasant.

I found my way back onto the path, by the River Darrent, and it was exceptional
in its beauty. Once again, and much like the previous day, I found myself walking in
the shade of the riverside trees, with the added cooling effect of the river itself. The
air was so clear and the freshness of the leaves added to the sense of purity that I
was experiencing. It was truly delightful and I cherished every moment that I spent
walking along that section of the river.

I was so consumed in my appreciation for the landscape I was travelling through,
that I completely forgot about my quest to replenish my water supply and it was
only through another stroke of luck that I was reminded. As I approached a bridge,
crossing the river, I was completely focused on it and it was only by chance that I
happened to look back from whence I had came. I suddenly saw the same
gentleman (who had already helped me to navigate my way through Lullingstone
Park on two occasions before) appear on the path, from apparently nowhere. He
headed back along the river, in the opposite direction, and I was intrigued to find
out where he’d just come from.

I retraced my steps back thirty or so yards, and to the point where I had seen
him emerge, and lo and behold, it was the entrance to the Lullingstone Park Visitors
Centre. The gentleman had helped me for the third time that day! I went in (while
counting my blessings!) and queued up in the café line to gain my essential refills.
The visitor centre staff were very helpful and ever so pleased to assist.

“That was nice,” I thought.

After that it was onwards to Otford and I was looking forward to joining the Pilgrims
Way proper. The countryside along this section of the Darrent Valley Path was very
agreeable, although it did stray somewhat from the banks of the actual river itself.
Although I felt like I was walking at a reasonably good pace (considering the heat
and the state of my unmentionables) it did seem to take me quite a long time to
complete, and my feet (bugger!) were feeling the effects quite severely. An already
exceptionally hot day was now upping its game and it went into the unprecedented!
It had (once again!) become the hottest day of the year (so far!) and I couldn’t believe that it was possible to get any hotter!

I saw Otford, from a distance as I approached it, and felt a sense of relief as I had set myself the target of arriving there before I allowed myself the privilege of a proper break. I was already very low on water again and would need a refill quite imminently. I crossed the last field (before the buildings of the village began) and entered a quaint little lane which was home a row of cottages and to a traditional Kent Oast. It was very picturesque and I thought how well maintained it all looked.

There were no “front gardens” to the cottages, as such, but instead the whole vicinity gave the impression of being one municipal garden. It had the feeling of a “private” area, but the “public” footpath was running directly through it. I saw that the path then rejoined the banks of the River Darrent and there was a very welcoming patch of grass beckoning me to sit upon it, while encouraging me to dip my former stars (who were now enjoying celebrity status) in the healing (and cooling) waters of the river.

I had a feeling that if I did that then the odds were that some resident would come out and complain about my existence, but my “celebrities” really needed a break (and some deserved attention) and this place looked perfect. I unloaded my backpack, gathered my book and the remains of my water, and then I took my shoes and socks off of my “plates of meat”. I then sat on the bank of the river (which was bricked and looked very civilised) and placed my feet into the cool abyss.

“Oh – my - God!!!!!!” I thought, and I can still remember the sensation so vividly now! It was bliss... absolute bliss!!!

I couldn’t even look at my book for a few minutes, so wonderful was the sensation. It made me tingle all over and I felt so relaxed that I wanted to fall asleep. I laid back for a few minutes, in the shade of a small tree, with flickers of light from the strong sun piecing through the tree canopy, warming me in places, while allowing me the opportunity to feel predominately cool. It was so good to get the weight off my back and off of my… you know!

After an extended period of “indulgent” time, I gained the will to raise myself from my slumber and adopted a sitting position once more. My feet throbbed and tingled, in the water, and I have to say it was (once again) a very pleasurable sensation. I really didn’t want to leave this spot!!! I began to read my book and made the most of the moment.

After a while of sitting there, and reading, a lady appeared in the garden on the opposing side of the river bank. She was dressed in a swim suit and lowered herself into the water by some steps built into the bank by her garden. The area of river, immediately in front of me, was about four feet deep and formed a nice, and steadily flowing, pool.

“Oh hello,” I interjected.

“Hello,” she replied, and then “You do realise that this is a private road?”

“To be honest, I did wonder, but didn’t think I’d be doing any harm,” I responded,
with an apologetic tone.

“Where have you come from,” she asked, while beginning to swim breast stroke against the light current.

“From Lullingstone today, but actually all the way from Barking, in East London,” I informed her.

“Oh, you’ve come from that direction have you... so you wouldn’t have seen the signs,” she said, half to me and half to herself.

“No, I haven’t seen any signs, but would you mind if I stayed for a short while? My feet really need it,” I said, while lifting my feet out of the water to give her the benefit of seeing the sticky patches attached.

“Yes, that’s quite alright. Looking at you, you seem to be quite trust worthy and you don’t give me the impression of to being trouble maker. You’re not are you... a trouble maker?” she asked in a kind of rhetorical question sort of way.

“No, I don’t tend to be!” I replied with a little bit of a laugh “Why, do you get many trouble makers here then?” I enquired by way of continuing the conversation.

“Oh, just the local youngster’s. They come down here to swim and they never ask. We used to let them, but then it became too much and some of them were behaving quite awfully. So we had to stop it. It wasn’t all of them, of course, but the one’s that spoiled it didn’t respect the fact that this was our space,” she explained.

I could understand what she was saying and I sympathised. We went on to have a very pleasant conversation (generally about the weather!) while she swam in the cool water and I watched on in envy! I told her that I was doing a pilgrimage (although I didn’t mention it’s reason because, for some reason, I didn’t have the impression that she would understand) and she then started telling me about the history of her house. It was formerly a Water Mill and much of the mechanisms were still in place. As she was finishing her swim, her husband turned up and introduced himself, along with their family dog.

“Oh Bugger,” I thought, and sure enough it jumped into the water right next to me… SPLASH!!! All over me and my book again!!!

...“Oh, you little bastard!” I thought, as, and not for the first time, I was “aquatically” assaulted by another person’s four legged friend!!! I have to admit I was getting quite sick of it by then and I had even tired of the owner’s belated apologies!!!

“Ok, that’s the end of the pleasantness,” I thought, as the dog persisted to keep getting out of the water and jumping back in again.

It was having fun... but I wasn’t!!!

I moved further along the bank and began to dry my feet and collect my things. The lady then asked if I would like a cold drink and invited me across their bridge and into their house. I accepted and we then proceeded to have very enjoyable half an hour whereby she (and her husband) showed me the historic quirks their house
possessed and gave me a more in-depth account of its history. I was fascinated and I greatly appreciated the impromptu distraction. I found it most entertaining and informative.

Once my guided tour ended, I finished my drink and it was time for me to depart. I expressed my gratitude and they wished me well on the rest of my journey. I laden myself with my backpack, once more, and then headed off into the haze of the afternoon heat. Halfway down the remainder of the lane I then realised that I’d forgotten to ask if I could refill my water bottles!

I debated about going back, and although I thought that they might not take kindly to me re-appearing, I did so, but there was no answer when I knocked. I thought better of it and didn’t wait for very long, but left and continued to think that I could probably find somewhere in the village to refill my bottles anyway.

However, it did lead me to wonder why I had the feeling that they wouldn’t have taken “kindly” to hearing that I was doing a pilgrimage in remembrance of Brian Haw in the first place. I don’t know why that was exactly, it was just a feeling I had and I certainly didn’t know it for a fact. All I can say is that my intuition told me that their “political” ideology was not conducive to what Brian Haw stood for and did for what he believed in (and/or to myself for that matter). I felt that if I had mentioned it, then my welcome would’ve been more “short lived” and that I would’ve been politely ushered out of the door!!!

Again, I don’t know this for a fact (and it may very well be that it actually highlights some prejudices within myself), but what I will say is that my intuition is rarely wrong in these circumstances, or rather, I rarely misinterpret my intuition in these circumstances. But I wish to make it absolutely clear that the next thoughts that came my way were not directly related to, or directed at, the people who were just so good to me. It was rather that the analysing of my intuition (about them) led me on to think about the kind of people who were against Brian Haw and what he did.

Does that make sense? I hope so, because those people are not here to defend themselves and correct me if I am wrong. But there are most definitely people out there who think that Brian’s peaceful protest was wrong, that it consumed “vital police resources” and that it should have been “cleaned up” because it made Parliament Square look “untidy”. Well, to all those people, I dedicate the recollection of the thoughts I had next, while I walked down the remainder of that private lane and finally joined the ancient Pilgrims Way at the point where it crossed the River Darrent.

This is what I thought and what I wanted to say to those people, of the like, that I have just described...

WHAT ABOUT THE DESTRUCTION?!!! WHAT ABOUT THE MAYHEM CAUSED?!!! WHAT ABOUT THE REMAINS OF DEPLETED URANIUM POLLUTING COUNTRIES AND CAUSING BIRTH DEFECTS IN CHILDREN FOR GENERATIONS TO COME?!!! WHAT ABOUT THAT MESS?!!!

WHAT ABOUT ALL THE PAIN AND SUFFERING CAUSED?!!! WHAT ABOUT THE MISERY?!!! WHAT ABOUT THE DECEIT DEMONSTRATED BY OUR POLITICIANS?!!! WHAT ABOUT THE LIES?!!!

AND YOU DARE TO THINK THAT YOU STAND ON SOME KIND OF MORAL HIGH GROUND?!!! YOU DARE TO CONDEMN A MAN WITH THE INTEGRITY AND THE HONESTY OF BRIAN HAW?!!! YOUR MORAL COMPASS IS DEFECTIVE AND YOU SHOULD TAKE A LONG AND GOOD LOOK AT YOURSELF!!!

For Christ’s sake open your eyes and see beyond the nonsense you observe in the mainstream media and news. That’s what Brian did, and that’s why he spent ten years of his life, living in a tent and protesting in Parliament Square.

I cried when I wrote that, but Brian put it best:

“We have a right to freedom of expression. If you can’t do it here, outside Parliament, where can you do it?”

And that, fundamentally, is what the people who are against peaceful and democratic acts should ask themselves. I’ll leave it with you to consider.
I finally joined the Pilgrim’s Way and I said goodbye to the River Darrent. I felt like I was beginning a new leg of my journey and I had a renewed vigour... which lasted about five minutes because it was so bloody hot!!! I was immediately sweating and I thought that it was ridiculous for me to continue for long. I remembered (again) the wise words of the bloke that I passed in the park at Dartford - “It’s too hot for that mate!” – and I decided to find a quiet spot in the shade somewhere in order to “ride out” the heat.

It was about 1.30pm and I figured (with the heat such as it was) I wouldn’t be able to start walking again until about 4pm. I resolved to find a place to refill my bottles, buy some supplies and then just listen to the tennis on BBC Radio 5 Live (Wimbledon was in full flow) for the rest of the afternoon. It sounded like a good plan and I put the wheels in motion.

As I wandered into the village centre, I saw a café in which I thought I could maybe ask to gain a water refill. Now, there happens to be an odd peculiarity in some places (and with some people) in England (which I have just brushed upon while explaining my experience at the Water Mill) by which you may ask for a little of something (and that is absolutely no problem), but if you then ask (out of sheer need and necessity) for slightly more than that “little something” (and even if it is merely a “little something more” upon the original “little something”) then that “little something more” somehow manifests into a “big something more” and you will then be considered a problem and a liberty taker!!!

Well, this is exactly what then happened to me, in all its fine English glory, and even though I did my very best to counteract and avoid it!!! I didn't want to go into a café and take the “liberty” of just asking for some tap water on the hottest day of the English summer thus far. Instead, I thought I'd buy something in there too, so I would also make myself a patron of the establishment as well. This appeared (to me) to be “fair play” in action and I was jolly pleased with myself – “Good game Sir! Well batted!!!!”

But... oh no, no, no silly man!!!

Firstly, and I do make an apology for this, the only thing I wanted to buy in the establishment was a can of that brown stuff in a red tin...

(I know, bite me, I’m well aware of what it does to your insides, I did do that experiment at school - submerging a penny in it overnight and seeing what was left of the penny in the morning... if indeed there still was a penny left to be seen!!!)

... because when I’m walking long distances, I sometimes just want some kind of sugar fix and it seems to do the trick. I figured the sugar and acid “delight” would be around eighty pence to a pound (being in a café) but was shocked to discover (when I got the drink and placed it onto the counter) that the lady serving was asking for the price of £1.20!
“You’re having a bubble bath” came to mind, and water or no water, patron or no patron, that was just a bit too much over the odds for me to even consider paying and there was no way I was having that kind of “liberty” taken with me (you see the English thing again!). I went to walk out of the establishment, without even asking for the water, and the owner suddenly piped up and asked:

“Are you going to drink it here?”

“No,” I replied, and she said;

“Well, you can have it for 80p then.”

“Oh, thanks,” I responded, thinking that was fair enough.

I walked back to the counter and the assistant served me, apologising for not knowing the “take-out” prices because she was new. I said it was ok and then asked if she wouldn’t mind filling my water bottles up with tap water as I was on a pilgrimage to Canterbury and it was blooming hot outside!!! She smiled and then looked at the owner for authorisation. The owner then said half-jokingly “How much do you think that should be then?” and I replied three-quarter jokingly “I don’t know... how much does it cost?!” She smiled and nodded to say yes to the assistant.

The assistant saw the litre bottle I had in my hand and took it to refill while I opened up my backpack in order to get my other two bottles out. As she returned my filled bottle to me I produced the other bottles and she gave me a funny look.

“Oh, you want those filled up as well do you?” she said in a suddenly agitated fashion.

“Err, well yes, if you wouldn’t mind,” I replied in a tone of “What’s the problem?”

The assistant looked at her employer once more, who now also had a frown upon her face, but still nodded yes in order to authorise the action. The assistant took the bottles, with a “You’re taking the piss look” on her face, and proceeded to refill them.

I really didn’t understand what difference there was between filling three bottles with tap water to that of filling one, but maybe there was a few seconds in it, and after all, this was England!!! Once done, I thanked them both, packed the bottles in my backpack and then left the café with what felt like “dirty looks” following me out of the door!

“That was nice!” I thought sarcastically!

Otford is a very picturesque village, and the centre boasts a lovely village pond which is the main focus of attention as you pass through. On the other side of the road (to the row of shop’s where I stood) was a green which hosted a bench under the shade of a tree.

“That’s where I’m going to spend the afternoon,” I thought and went over to check it out.

It was perfect and I noted a traditional red public telephone box in which I planned to make a call home at some point too. There was also a beautiful church within view and the whole scene was very pleasant. Before I did that, however, I wanted to visit a shop (for some supplies) and was told that there was a “mini-
market” a short distance away. I followed the directions and discovered it.

On the way back, I cut across a field which happened to house the last remains of Otford Palace. Otford Palace was once one of the residences of the Arch Bishop of Canterbury and it apparently rivalled Hampton Court in terms of its size and its splendour. It was relinquished to the Crown, during the reign of Henry VIII, and now only one part of the gatehouse remains. It’s interesting to see though.

I arrived back at “my” bench and began making my lunch while listening to the radio. I was lucky because Andy Murray was playing against Richard Gasquet and I had almost caught the very beginning of the match.

“Come on the “sweaty sock”,” I said, while taking off my shoes!!!

I know the English are the recipients of a lot of animosity from the “Jocks”, but I didn’t mind supporting a Scotsman. He was British after all and someone from this Island has got to win The Championships again one day! When I was younger I used to dream that it would be me! Well, at least for two weeks out of every year, and then it was back to dreaming about lifting the FA Cup at Wembley!

“Come on Murray!” I kept muttering to myself as I ate my lunch and kept out of the afternoon heat. It was a truly magnificent day (but just not for walking!) and I enjoyed my time sitting there, in the shade, watching the world go by and listening to Wimbledon. Andy Murray did his job (quite efficiently) and was through to the quarter-finals. That was my cue to get moving again. It was, by then, around four o’clock. I collected my things and wandered over to the phone box and called home to “check-in” and let everyone know how I was doing. It was nice to hear my Mum’s voice again and also to hear that everyone was good.

So, after that, it was onwards and (as I was soon to discover) considerably upwards to join the North Downs Way!

As I reached the outskirts of the village I encountered my first sign for “The Pilgrims Way” and it was a bit of a magical moment. I was now on the spiritual path that countless others had followed, for a time immemorial, and I felt a sense of privilege that I was now joining their number. I really did feel a sense of the by-gone there, a sense of the historic and of the ancient. It’s hard to qualify, but the sensation certainly existed.

Almost immediately I was heading up, at an acute angle, and really “laying into” my assent to the top of the North Downs. The higher I got the more wonderful the view was, and as I peered back, I looked over Otford (as I left it in my wake) and saw beyond to the hills of Kent (and possibly Surrey).

“Top drawer!” I thought.

As I got to the top I discovered, through a gap in the trees, a large Christian Cross marked on a hill in the far distance. “That’s a nice touch,” I thought.

The path then meandered its way, on a mostly level footing, through a mixture of marvellous meadows and fields, and wonderful woodlands and forests, until you come out to behold the magnificent sight of the valley containing Seven Oaks. I
carried on and saw a “Christian wooden cross”, on the edge of the hill, which was announcing itself to the entire area. I felt like it was time for another break, so I walked down towards it and sat within its vicinity.

It was now at a time of before six o’clock and the sun was well below its zenith in the heavens. It was now radiating its warm beams through a gradually clouding sky. I took in the remarkable scene, then took off my shoes and lay back to have a little doze. It was lovely, laying there in the short grass and enjoying the last rays of the sun before the clouds drifted over to consume them.

That was until I realised that the reason why the grass was so short was because there had been many rabbits grazing upon it and those rabbits, in turn, had left copious amounts of their “solid” waste behind and it turned out that I had been laying in most of it!!

“Oh, you little bastards!!” I declared as I shot right up and dusted off all of the tiny droppings from my clothes and from the back of my head!!

“Gor blimey!!! Is there anywhere on this planet where I can rest in peace without having my moment spoiled by an unruly animal!!!” I shouted to myself, in jest, but also in genuine frustration!

“Doing their bloody shit everywhere!!!” I demonstrated, and then thought that the animals probably felt exactly the same way about me and rest of the human race! Fair play!!! At least it had been hot that day and so the droppings didn’t stick! I tried to get comfortable in another spot, but the clouds were coming over and the last of the warm sunshine had disappeared. It was time to move on.

“Bloody rabbits!” I thought, “I’m done with Watership Down!”

Shortly after I had left my resting spot I met three middle-aged ladies coming along the path in the opposite direction. I say met, but I heard them a long way off first of all. They appeared to be having a “whale of a time” and I could hear their laughter from afar. When I did bump into them they were extremely jolly and we stopped and talked for a while. They asked where I was going, and I told them, and then they told me their story.

Apparently, they had been doing the North Downs Way for a number of months (one day and one section at a time) and when they could all get together. They all lived in different area’s and had an interesting system of organising their special days out together, so that no one would have to use public transport and there would always be a car waiting for them at the end of their days trek. We spoke about it for a short while and then they asked me to work out how they managed to arrange their day. Do you fancy trying to work it out for yourself? It was pretty good! Ok, here we go...

How do you get three lovely ladies from their houses (located in three different areas) to the beginning of a path (in another area) and collect them from the end of that path (in yet another area) and take them back to their three separate houses, using only two cars and with no other transport?
Now that’s a question!!! Answers on a postcard to:
     “How did they do that?” competition - PO Box 1D UNO!!!

Only joking, but just for a laugh, I’ll leave some space for you to work this one out underneath and I’ll give the answer on the next page!!! You think I’m joking? I had to stand there, in front of them and on the Pilgrims Way, trying to work it out with no paper! So you can attempt to do the same!!! Come on then, let’s be having you...
Ok, basically...

Lovely Lady “A” would leave her home (Point A1) and collect Lovely Lady “B” from her house (Point B1) and meet lovely lady “C” at Rendezvous Point 2 (RVP2). Lovely Lady “C” would leave her house (Point C1) and collect Lovely Ladies “A” and “B” from RVP2 and deliver all the Lovely Ladies to Rendezvous Point 1 (RVP1). All the Lovely Ladies would then hike to RVP2 whereby Lovely Lady “A” would then drive all of the Lovely Ladies back again to RVP1 and drop off Lovely Lady “C”. Lovely Lady “C” would then drive herself back to PC1, while Lovely Lady “A” would drive to PB1 before returning to her place of origin at PA1.

Did you work that out for yourself? I tried, but then I just couldn’t be arsed and so I just got them to tell me! It was good fun trying though and we had a laugh. I asked the ladies about the path up ahead as I was hoping to come across a pub in order to refill my water bottles and to have a cheeky beer. The ladies then informed me, with great delight, that they had a late lunch in a wonderful pub that was right on the North Downs Way. They said that the lady who ran it was lovely and that she made the best sandwiches! They then went onto explain that they had just arrived as she was closing for the late afternoon, but that she opened up again just for them. They were very pleased and quite impressed with her kindness.

“That sounds like where I’m going then,” I declared, pointing my finger onwards.

The ladies laughed and then told me to tell Val (the Landlady) that the Three Ladies had sent me! I promised that I would and then asked how much farther along the path it was from where we were. They told me it was “Maybe about another hours walk,” and I thought “Bonus, that’ll give me time to get there before eight o’clock, relax and have a beer for an hour, and then still leave an hour or so of daylight in order to find a place to make camp.” I thanked the ladies and wished them well, and they returned the sentiment to me.

“That was nice,” I thought.

So it was onwards, and onto, the finest thing in all of the civilised world, a place of song and banter, a place of debate and chatter, and a place of imbibing and in-articulating. It was time I was heading to… the pub!!!

I journeyed on, with renewed desire, and eagerly awaited my well deserved pint! The sun had appeared again and the countryside, once more, looked illuminated in its beauty, with a freshness which only a certain type of light can unveil through the clearest of air. My “unmentionables” were less trouble than they had been earlier and I made good time arriving at The Vigo Inn at around half-past seven in the evening.

As I walked through the doors of the Inn I immediately felt a very peaceful and welcoming atmosphere. I always feel that a pub’s ambiance always reflects the
character of its proprietors and it was clear that the Landlord and Landlady of this establishment were the nicest kind of people. The recommendation of the three lovely ladies appeared to be a good one and, all at once, I felt at home. I approached the wooden bar and a lady was standing behind it.

“I was sent here by three lovely ladies, they recommended you to me and said that you were very kind,” I stated outright.

“Oh,” said the landlady, looking a bit bemused.

“They stopped here for a late lunch and said that you’re sandwiches were excellent. They told me you were closing up at the time, but that you still let them in,” I explained further.

“Oh, those ladies,” she said with a final recognition “Well, I wasn’t going to turn them away.”

“How nice,” I thought.

“What would you like?” she then asked.

“Actually,” I said “Could I just go into the toilet and freshen up a bit. It’s been blooming hot out there today!”

“Of course,” she said with a smile, and I trotted off to the pubs public conveniences. I took my time, and refreshed myself somewhat, a little bit concerned that I may have “pen and inked” because of the profuse sweating I’d had to endure that day. Once done, I reassured myself that I didn’t stink that badly and re-entered the bar. The lady was no longer there though and a man had replaced her. It was the landlord.

“Have you walked far?” he immediately asked.

“Quite far, from Barking would you believe? I’m walking on a pilgrimage to Canterbury,” I replied to inform him.

“Barking? That’s in London isn’t it?” he asked again.

“Yeah, well, East London... or Essex depending on how old you are!!!” I said.

There were only two other blokes in the bar at that time and they had listened to the beginning of our conversation. One of the blokes then interjected.

“Barking, blimey, I went to a pub there once and I felt like I was lucky to get out alive! Rough place,” he volunteered.

“Which pub was that then?” I immediately enquired with interest.

“The Dog something or other,” he replied.

“Oh, it must have been the Barking Dog, there’s the Spotted Dog next door, but that’s a more traditional and civilised pub... actually it’s probably the last decent pub left in the centre of Barking,” I explained.

“Yeah, the Barking Dog, that rings a bell. I’m not going back that’s for sure, I only stayed for ten minutes and then I left,” the bloke continued.

“Is it bad there then?” the landlord questioned.

“Well, it’s not that bad, but I understand what he’s saying. I did generally grow up with the “10 second rule” while living in Barking,” I said.
“What’s that then?” the bloke asked.

“Basically, wherever you are and whatever you’re doing, you’re only ever ten seconds away from a bundle!!! You could be having a really nice time, down the pub, at a party or just minding your business walking along the street, and then all of a sudden some idiot can come along and pick a fight with you, then suddenly all mayhem breaks loose! Ten seconds is all it takes, so I’ve grown up always being “ready to go” because you have to. So I know what you mean mate,” I said giving an in depth explanation.

“It’s terrible isn’t it,” the landlord said.

“Yeah, but like I say, it doesn’t happen all the time. You just have to be aware that it can happen and look out for yourself,” I continued.

“And that’s where you’re from is it?” the bloke asked.

“Yeah… anyway, can I have a beer?!” I said with a smile.

“Yeah… anyway, can I have a beer?!” I said with a smile.

“Oh, of course,” the landlord replied “What would you like? I don’t know if I could interest you, but I like my German beers and I get some special ones delivered in especially. They’re a bit more expensive, but you can try them first if you want.”

Now that question, in its essence, is the mark of a true and civilised pub! A landlord that allows you to sample his beer, before you buy it, is someone who truly cares about his product!!! And seeing as I had been to the Munich Oktoberfest a decade before I knew how good pure and proper German beer could be. I willingly took him up on his offer, sampling two beers and choosing one, and it was a tough decision I have to say!

We did our introductions and it turned out that Andy (the landlord) was a musician and still played the odd gig. He started telling me about some of his experiences he’d had in London, while he was on the road, and especially about a pub he played at in Woolwich whereby he wasn’t paid and when he went to ask for his money the bouncers threatened to “beat him up”.

He seemed such a kind hearted fellow and I couldn’t see how anyone could ever get angry with him, let alone want to “beat him up”. We both surmised (and sympathised) that some people in this world were terrible to each other at times and it was something we both found hard to understand.

The other bloke finished his beer and said farewell (with his friend), wishing me luck on my journey, and I continued to speak with Andy. The landlady reappeared and Andy introduced me to Val properly. He then explained that today was a special day for them as they had only just confirmed that they owned the pub. They’d been there for six months already, but it was only today that they had finally signed the contracts to endorse the fact that it was theirs.

“Is it celebration time then?” I asked.

“No, not tonight, we’re planning an “opening” night for Friday,” he explained.

“Well, when I get to Canterbury I’ll light a candle for you and pray for your success,” I said.

“That’ll be nice of you. Would you like another one?” Andy asked, seeing my glass
was almost empty.

The beer went down so well and it was just the tonic I needed after the long hot day. I asked if I could try the other beer and Andy dually got another glass and filled it for me.

“Lovely,” I thought... I thought “Lovely.”

A couple turned up in the pub and Andy went to serve them, leaving me to find a seat by the window of the bar. I sat down, taking the weight off of my feet, proceeded to take my shoes off and just enjoyed the moment in the ambience of the place. It was because of places like this that I loved England so much. It wasn’t just because it was a place to rest and a place to refresh in a beautiful and comfortable setting, but it was also because it was a place to meet people, a place to enjoy conversation and a place where by you would never be a stranger for very long. Those are the components which comprise a real and true English Pub to me and it is why I say it is one of the finest institutions in all of the civilised world.

The evening was getting on and I was thinking that I would have to leave shortly because the light was beginning to fade outside. Andy had continued to engage me in intermittent conversation, as he worked, and Val (to a lesser extent) had done the same. I finished my pint, and decided that I needed to be off, when Andy (once again) saw my empty glass and offered to refill it. I explained that I had to leave while it was still light, in order to find a spot to camp for the night, and I asked if he could refill my water bottles for me.

“Where are you camping then?” he immediately asked.

“Oh, I’ll just find somewhere nice further along the path,” I explained.

“You’re not going to a campsite then?” he continued.

“No, firstly I prefer to camp wild in the nature, and secondly, I haven’t got enough money for that anyway!” I replied.

“Oh,” he said while thinking “Well, you can camp in our beer garden at the back if you want” and then before I got a chance to reply he called out to Val “Val... it’s alright if Lee stays in the garden tonight isn’t it?”

Val gave a positive response and everything appeared to be fine.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s fine. We once had a group come along who were also on a pilgrimage, except they were doing it in nothing but the clothes they were wearing and had no money. We let them stay here too,” Andy said.

“Yeah, God knows what they were going to do if it rained, they were staying in barns or just shelters they found,” Val continued to say.

“Blimey,” I said “That’s really making an effort that is!”

Andy then offered to take me outside to show me where I could stay. I put my shoes back on and we went walking out to the back of the pub. I thought it was quite impressive out there, very tranquil and pleasing to the eye. Since they had taken over the running of the pub, Andy had built a fine patio and barbeque area, and even a summer bar which he said I could stay in too if I wanted. I told Andy
that I was happy to camp on the lawn and wondered if I should put my tent up
straight away (because of the light), but he informed me that there was no need
because the garden was flood lit and he showed me where I could turn the light on
(and off) from for later.

Outside of the beer garden there were also a couple of acres of land (with a
couple of oak trees in it) which were part of the pubs property too and Andy said
that he hoped that they could get permission for a campsite. I replied (very
enthusiastically) that that would be amazing, especially for them being right bang on
the Pilgrims Way. Andy then went on to explain his aspirations for the pub to focus
on music. He wanted it to be a place where people could come and play music for
free and express themselves. He planned open mic nights, acoustic nights and bands
playing at weekends.

He thought that if someone became inspired to play music, because of the
opportunities he wanted to provide, then that would be fantastic, and if they went
even further and started to record music because of it, then that would be even
more fantastic. He was really talking with a genuine heart and I was beginning to
feel really inspired myself!

We then went back into the pub, returned to our original spots (either side of the
bar) and Andy looked at my pint glass once again.

“So are you having another one of those then?” Andy asked.

“Well, yes, thank you, seeing as I’m staying, it would be rude not too! Thank you
so much... to be honest, I didn’t really want to leave anyway,” I said with a cheeky
smile.

Andy smiled back and poured me another pint of his fine German beer, and when
I went to pay he refused me.

“Don’t worry about that,” he said.

That was such a special moment on my Pilgrimage. I looked at Andy and I felt a
sense of thanks with all of my being. And it wasn’t just because of the pint he was
giving me either! It was because of everything. It was because of all the kindness
that he and Val had shown me from the moment that I had walked through their
door. And all that kindness was encapsulated in that one offering... that one present.
These were such kind people and they were the kind of people that enriched my
spirit and renewed my faith in the goodness of the human race. It was no wonder
that I felt so at home.

“Thank you,” is all I said in return and with an ever so slight, and respectful, nod
of my head.

I pulled up a stool to the bar and I began to sip at my pint, in thorough gratitude
and appreciation for the fact that I could stay there and that I wouldn’t have to
venture out into the evening dusk in order to find another home for the night. I was
really enjoying myself! I asked again about the refills for my water bottles and Andy
happily obliged after taking them from me.

“Do you know that it’s part of every pubs licensing agreement that we have to provide water to people free of charge?” he said as he filled the bottles from the tap.

“Actually, I did know that, we did a bit about those type of things when I was at college,” I replied.

“Well, I thought I’ll let you know just in case because some pubs refuse to do it and they’re breaking the terms of their license if they do,” he continued.

“It’s good to know,” I said “and a fantastic thing, in all honesty.”

The couple (who had been in the other bar for a good part of the evening) departed which left me as the last “patron” remaining in the pub. Andy come over and took a stool on the opposing side of the bar (to myself) and we began to converse. He was such a pleasant man and I found him to be of excellent company. He was one of those people that you just feel comfortable with and not someone who judges you in any way. He just had a very “accepting” vibe about him and a vibe which also said that if he could help you, then he would. As indeed, he did!!!

Andy asked me more about my Pilgrimage. I began telling him about the reasons for it and about the world in which I wished to live. I spoke a bit about Brian Haw and then started talking about the system of money that we used and how it controlled everyone’s lives by taking all the real wealth away from the mass of the hard working population and handing it to the few who did next to nothing of real worth to earn and receive it. Andy asked me what I meant and so I explained further.

“Basically, all the money you see on your bank statement is fictitious, and the money you have in your pocket is a debt. Every pound created and in circulation is a debt, and that’s why it says on your Bank of England notes that “I promises to pay the bearer on demand the sum of…

That’s because pound notes are not actually money, but rather “promissory” notes. It actually says what it is on the tin!!! The whole banking system has been set up to keep everyone chasing money (and distracting them from thinking about anything else by the way) through the system of charging interest on the “fictitious” money they loan. This is what’s controlling people’s lives and why they’re working longer and longer for less and less,” I said.

“What do you mean though? You have to borrow money and the people loaning it have to make something out of it otherwise they wouldn’t lend it,” Andy replied.

“But most of the money being lent never existed and will never exist. It’s all just based on the trust we put in the system, and it’s a system that works against us and doesn’t help us,” I said.

“Yeah, but we needed a mortgage to buy this place and if the bank didn’t lend it to us then we couldn’t have bought it, so the system does help us,” Andy deduced.

“Yeah and how much interest do you have to pay back on that loan? How many physical hours work do you have to do just to keep the repayments up? And if you don’t… what will happen? All your hard work will go to the bank because they’ll take
the pub off of you,” I said and then continued “Do you know what? I’ll tell you a little story - my brother bought a little one bedroom bungalow (with his girl on Canvey Island) a few years ago. It’s all they could afford yet both of them worked full time – and what does that say about the state of affairs for a start!

After four years my brother worked out that he and his girl had paid over twenty thousand pounds in mortgage repayments back to the bank, yet his “debt” had only been reduced by four thousand pounds!

You aint got to be a mathematician to figure out that there’s something not quite right about that. It’s bollocks mate. Basically my bother (after he’d paid all his tax) had pretty much worked one year for the bank and all he had to show for it was four thousand pounds. It’s nonsense and yet everyone carries on playing a game whereby the rules are set against them!”

Andy was just listening by now appearing to be quite intrigued by what I was saying.

“Do you know how this nonsense works mate?” I asked rhetorically “If you went to a bank and deposited 10p to open a bank account, the bank can then loan out £1 because they have the “legal right” to “create” money up to 10 times the value of their deposits. So now that you have an account with the bank, you may ask to borrow some money from it, so you now ask to borrow £1 to start your business.

The bank has done nothing, but legally it has the right now to loan you the whole of that pound (because YOU had just deposited 10p) and it does this by simply inputting the figure onto a computer keyboard and entering it into your account.

Now, YOU have to then go out into the physical world and work hard to earn money by either creating things in the “physical” world or by providing a service to people in the “physical” world, and with the money you earn from your hard work you buy things of value in the “physical” world and you pay back the loan for your business.

But the thing is, you will not just pay back what you have borrowed, you will have to pay back more than you borrowed for the “privilege” of a bank pressing some numbers on a keyboard and entering those numbers into your account. You will now have to pay back £1.20, all because you gave the bank 10p of your hard earned cash in the first place! But this is where it gets even crazier... the bank, because of the loan it gave to you, can now consider that loan as part of its “deposits”, so even though the bank only received 10p off of you to begin with, because you are going to pay back £1.20, it now has the legal right to create “money” to the tune of £12!!! That £12 can then be “lent” to other people and they will likewise be charged interest on that fictitious money too!!! It’s mental!!! Did you ever wonder where all the money for the banker’s bonuses came from?!!!!”

I was really on a roll, and to be fair to Andy, he seemed happy just to listen.

“But the other thing is; if you default on your repayment then the bank collects all the assets of “physical” wealth that you have accumulated and this is the way that they suck the actual wealth from the people and hand it to the few who control the system (and who do next to nothing for it). But the most “insane” part of the system
is that it only works if the banks continue to loan money out to people and (by doing so) keeping the money flowing into it. If the banks stop lending money, then there is less and less money flowing around the economy because of the fact that there is no more money coming into it and what money is left is being used up to pay the “interest” (on the existing loans) back to the banks who created it in the first place!

And if the banks continue to stop loaning money, the economy falls into a recession because there is not enough money left flowing around the system, and the available money continues to disappear because of all the payments made to service the interest on all the existing loans! This has the consequence of more and more people chasing less and less money to service their own loans, and eventually leads to some of the people failing to pay the interest on their existing loans, resulting in the banks receiving the ownership of all their physical possessions and assets!!

The whole system begins and ends with the banks and they manipulate the system, for their own ends and as they please, in order to control people’s lives and accumulate more and more of the world’s physical wealth. This is exactly what happened in 2008, if you remember, when everything was pretty rosy yet we were being consistently told (for the whole year!) that we were heading for, and into, a recession. The banks then stopped lending money to people and very soon we were in one!

The fact is that there will never be, and won’t ever be, enough money in circulation to cover all the debts accrued from borrowing money because every bit of money in circulation today has been created as a debt and so has the equivalent of a “bounty” set upon it.

It’s complete madness and nonsense, but it’s the reality we’re living in and it’s the other reason why I’m doing this pilgrimage because this is not the world I want to live in anymore. There’s no reason why governments can’t lend their own populations “money” from the taxes people pay and only charge an administration fee, and maybe even some kind of insurance, to cover the costs of operating the system, “I finally finished in declaration!

“You’re a very intelligent man,” Andy then suddenly came out with.

“It’s nothing to do with intelligence Andy, it’s just about opening your eyes to see what’s going on,” I said, letting my Englishness get the better of me after finding myself a touch embarrassed by his comment!

“Would you like another beer?” he asked, seeing that I had downed another pint.

“Ah yeah, that’ll be lovely. Can I try the first German one again please?” I asked.

Andy filled another pint and gave it to me. Once again I went to pay and he refused me.

“Ah mate, come on,” I said, not wanting to take liberties.

But he refused point blank and asked me to carry on talking. I looked at him with a feeling of totally gratefulness, and he looked at me with an air of kindness and generosity, and with a look that said “Don’t be silly”.

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There was still only me and him left in the pub and Val only showed her face every now and then as she was beginning to close up for the night and was cooking their dinner in the kitchen. The beers were making me feel quite talkative and seeing as Andy appeared to be in a listening mood... I carried on talking!

“There’s an amazing thing I read recently in a great book called “Supernatural” by a guy called Graham Hancock,” I began.

“What’s that then?” Andy asked.

“Well, basically the books about the hidden history of Mankind and questions the mainstream view of human history, asking how it was possible for humans to have been supposedly primitive (officially) for such a long period of time, but then to have formed sophisticated language and civilisations, suddenly, and only ten thousand years ago (or so). He started investigating the commonalities in the cave art found around the world and then the book went from there.

Apparently, a bloke called David Lewis-Williams came up with a theory that the commonalities in cave art, from different periods in time, and at different locations around the world, could be explained by humans going into altered states of consciousness (by the use of hallucinogenic drugs derived from plants available in different parts of the world) and recording what they saw. From Graham Hancock’s research, and from the study of the experiments conducted by scientists whose subjects were given LSD, there was a lot of substance to this theory because the same commonalities (in their visual experience to that of many cave paintings) occurred in the modern day subjects taking LSD,” I explained.

“You’re a very intelligent man,” Andy repeated again, while appearing to be totally focused on what I was saying and Val walked by giving me a strange look! Again, I thought that it wasn’t so much that I was intelligent, it was more that I was just repeating intelligent information.

“Anyway,” I continued “That’s not even the most fascinating part of the book. What I found the most astonishing was what Graham Hancock wrote about a phenomenon called “Zipf’s Law”.

“What’s that then?” Andy queried.

“Basically, a fellow called Zipf (I’m sorry but I can’t remember his first name)* was a linguist and studied different languages. He began to rank the frequency of words in texts and from different languages, and made a startling discovery. No matter what substantial body of text he studied, in any language, he found an exact link between the most frequently used word, to that of the tenth most frequently used word, to that of the one hundredth most frequently used word.

Put simply, if the most frequently used word (ranked 1) was used 1000 times, the tenth most frequently used word (ranked 10) would be used 100 times and the one hundredth most frequently used word (ranked 100) would be used 10 times!

* George Zipf discovered “Zipf’s Law” in 1939
It wasn’t a correlation he discovered, it was a straight line between the rank of a word and the frequency it was used, and this applied to every single human language from Arabic to English, from Japanese to Urdu. It’s mental mate!” I said excitedly.

“That’s unbelievable,” Andy said, while taking in what I was saying.

“Yeah, I know, and it shows that there must be a common consciousness between all of us and that we must be linked in some way through it, at least that’s what it says to me, but that’s not the most amazing part of it though. I don’t know if you know, but apparently when Francis Crick (and another geezer who, I’m so sorry again, but I can’t remember his name either)** discovered the DNA code, he did so after being under the influence of LSD. Basically, he had experimented with inter-dimensional travel and came back inspired with the information for the DNA code. He reckoned he had seen the “double helix” on his “trip”.

The thing is, Graham Hancock then went on to study some research carried out at Boston University*** which was investigating the nature of the DNA code. The researchers noticed that DNA was comprised of patterns of base pairs which were of three, four, five, six, seven and eight pairings in length and they thought that they were comparable to words. So they applied “Zipf” law to the sequences.

They found no distinct link to the base pairs which scientists had attributed to our “relevant” DNA – the part of the DNA which is the blueprint for our form, our body structure – but when they applied it to the 97% of what our scientists ludicrously call “junk DNA” they found a positive correlation and an almost perfect line!!!

So in short, they discovered the evidence of a language encrypted into our “junk DNA”!!!” I finished saying once more, taking a breather and having another “swig” of my beer.

“That’s amazing,” Andy said and then paused for thought.

“There’s a lot more to this world then the things we’re taught at school, Andy, and that’s a fact. Francis Crick reckoned that it was almost impossible for our DNA to have “evolved” by chance and that it must have been designed or seeded by an extra-terrestrial intelligence,” I said.

Andy didn’t say a word, but just digested what I had said and contemplated.

“There’s so much to understand and learn about the Universe, and our own human history,” I said “I’ve only just recently got to grips with the nature of time itself.”

“What do you mean?” Andy replied.

**James Watson was the gentleman who co-discovered the DNA Helix, along with Francis Crick, in 1953, and they apparently first announced their discovery to the world in the safe and secure surroundings of a civilised English Pub!!!

***The research was headed by Professor Eugene Stanley, in 1994, at Boston University and Harvard Medical School.
“Time doesn’t exist, mate! It’s something we’ve invented so that we can put our experience into some kind of perspective... some kind of order. There is no such thing as time. Everything that has ever happened, and everything that will ever happen, has happened in one moment and that’s why a lot of spiritual teachings teach you to live in the moment because the present is a gift. And it’s also why there’s no point continually looking to the future or hanging on to the past. “Be Here Now” is the phrase I think,” I said.

“I don’t understand,” Andy replied.

“To be honest, it took me a while to truly get my head around it myself. I understood the concept, but it’s one thing understanding a concept of something and it’s another understanding its reality. Like I say, it took me about two years of contemplating to get my head round it. That’s two years in what we perceive to be time!!!” I joked, and then continued “I wasn’t thinking about it all of the time, of course, I just had it on the back burner of my mind, simmering away, and gave it a few moments of consideration every so often, but when you get it... you really get it!

Basically, we think of time as running consistently, in moments, from moment A to moment B, onto moment C and then moment D. When we’re living moment D we assume that moment E will be in the future and moment C is now in our past. Like this…”

I stopped speaking and demonstrated the flow of time by signalling each moment with my hand outstretched and flattened while being side to side - like so:

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ > Moment flow (A-E)
A   B   C   D   E

“But actually the moments don’t flow like that because they are stacked up upon each other as there is no future or past, there is just the now, the moment of the point of our perspective…”

I then started to place my outstretched and flattened hands from being side by side to on top of one and other - like so:

___ Moment A
___ Moment B
___ Moment C
___ Moment D
___ Moment E
“What we’re actually experiencing is the change of our perspective through those moments that have already taken place. But it goes further because there is not a sequence of moments at all, actually, as there is in fact only one moment and everything has been condensed into that one moment…”

I then placed my outstretched and flattened hands on top of each other and then took one hand away in order to demonstrate that one moment - like so:

__ A Moment

“And in that moment everything that has ever happened, or will ever happen, has taken place. We are merely experiencing aspects of it as we journey through our perspective. So in effect, time doesn’t really exist, it has just been invented in order to help us understand and learn from our experience. And time gives us the perspective to view that experience. This is what I understand,” I explained.

“You are a very intelligent man,” Andy declared once again.

“It’s not so much that I’m intelligent,” I repeated again “It’s just that I’ve taken the time to ask these questions and contemplate their answers.”

“But why are you different? Why have you been asking these questions?” Andy then asked, seeming to be quite genuinely mystified.

“I don’t know mate, but I’ve always asked them since I was a kid. I’ve always seemed to know that there’s something more going on in this world, something more to it then I was seeing. To be honest, it’s taken me a long “time” to find things out, but the biggest catalyst for my questioning was when I was at College and doing Human Biology in one of my subject lessons. My biology teacher (who was very good I have to say) stated the fact that Human Beings are only using 10% of their brain capacity.

I couldn’t believe it and so I asked him why? “It’s just the way it is,” he answered, almost dismissively, and I remember almost having a stand up row with him for not answering me properly and for trying to avoid my continued questioning, as if it didn’t matter. Firstly, I thought that it was mental for that to be the truth, and secondly, I thought it was madness that no one else was questioning this “fact”! I couldn’t understand why it didn’t appear to matter to anyone.

The biggest question’s I had when I was sixteen were:

1) What has happened to the human race which has made us lose the ability to have access to so much our own brains?

2) What abilities do we possess if we gain complete access to them again?

That’s what was on my mind at sixteen, well, that and playing basketball I guess!!!”
Val appeared in the bar again and had a stern look for Andy. She explained that dinner was on the go and that it was now past closing time, and, if he wouldn’t mind, could he stop talking and start closing up for the evening. Andy, realising that we had both lost track of “time” was all apologies to Val and immediately started clearing the bar.

“It’s very interesting what you’ve said tonight,” Andy said while taking my nearly empty pint glass and then filling it up to half way with another shot of Deutschland’s finest.

“Cheers mate,” I said, referring to the unexpected “top-up” and not the compliment!

I continued to have piecemeal chatter with Andy about the things we (or I!!!) had spoken about that evening, and while he finished work for the night… I finished my beer! Meanwhile, Val kept popping out from the kitchen and reminding Andy that the dinner was ready. I had a feeling (because she had only overheard brief extracts of our conversation throughout the evening) that she probably wondered what on earth we had been talking about all night!!!

It had now gone past midnight, so it was no wonder that Val was now on Andy’s case to get sorted! But she still gave me a warm smile and I figured it was time for me to set up camp. I downed the last remains of my top-upped pint and bided them both a goodnight with much appreciation and thanks. Then I headed for the beer garden (a little bit merry because I had been drinking on an empty stomach!), found the flood lights (to switch them on) and set in motion my evening routine.

I found a nice spot in the beer garden, pitched my tent, settled in and began to cook some pasta on my meths burner. Although it was a bit late to cook, I was absolutely gagging to eat and was completely “Hank Marvin”. My stomach was now growly to a “starving” tune which was actually doing its best to mimic an instrumental record by The Shadows!!!

Just as I was getting sorted, Andy suddenly appeared and came over to me.

“I’m ever so sorry Lee, it was very rude of me, but we’re eating and I didn’t offer for you to come and join us. You must be hungry,” he said in such a caring tone of voice.

“Oh, it’s ok Andy. I’ve already got some pasta on the go, I’m cool… it’s Bachelors finest!!!” I replied, by way of a little joke.

“I feel terrible, would you like to join us. We have plenty,” Andy continued to explain.

“No, seriously Andy, I’m fine, I’m all good out here and you’ve already been so kind to me today. Don’t worry it’s no problem at all. Thank you though, it’s so nice for you to come out and think of me again,” I said while being grateful and sympathising at the same time.

“Well, if you’re sure. Anyway, I’ll leave the door open and feel free to come into the kitchen and make yourself some tea in the morning if you want,” Andy then offered.
“No, it’s fine mate, but thank you. I’ve got my burner, and my Earl Grey, and I’m all sorted. You’ve been so kind to me already and if I accept anymore then I’m going to start feeling bad!!!” I stated and then said “Thank you,” once again.

“Ok, well make sure you say goodbye to us before you leave tomorrow,” he said.

“Alright, and then you can make me a cup of tea!!!” I replied cheekily and with a smile.

Andy smiled too and we said goodnight to each other again. I then had my shower, munched on my pasta and turned off the flood lights before retiring to bed for the night. It was one-thirty in the morning! What a day and what a night!

“Goodnight world,” I thought.

Then my head hit my pillow... and I was dead to it!!!!
Below Left: River Darrent through Lullingstone
Below Right: Looking back where I saw my “guide” for the third time

Left: Oast at Otford
Below: Where I met the lady

Right: Remains of Otford Palace
Below: Otford Village Pond
Below Left: First sign for the Pilgrims way that I encountered
Below Right: View of Otford from the North Downs

Left: Along the North Downs way
Below: Where I lay to rest

Above Left: Christian Cross announcing itself to the valley
Above Right: Third nights camp site at the Vigo Inn
Day 4 – Tuesday 28th June, 2011

Seeing as I was on private land, and there was no rush to leave early, I treated myself to a lay-in that morning. It was exactly what I needed, after the night before, and I was pleased not to feel any ill effects from all the beer I had drunk.

“Good quality beer that German stuff,” I thought!

I raised myself at about 9.30am and noticed that it was a bit cooler that day. The sun shone in patches, but there appeared to be “heavy” clouds in the sky. I implemented my morning routine and then found a tap, in order to refill my water bottles once more, by which time it was past 10 o’clock. I thought that that represented a civilised moment (after the late night Val and Andy had too) to knock on the Vigo Inns back door and bid my farewell to them.

Val answered, and beckoned me in, and Andy was sitting at the table in the kitchen. He wished me a good morning and then offered me a cup of tea, which I dually accepted and appreciated. We talked the usual breakfast table pleasantries and I thanked them once again for their kindness and promised to say a prayer for their “abundance” when I reached the crypt in Canterbury Cathedral. They were pleased that they could help and wished me well on the rest of my journey.

They said that I was welcome back whenever I chose and that they would be glad to see me again. Andy then took it upon himself to declare that I was now their “little pilgrim friend”.

“It’s good to have friends,” I thought “but not so much of the little!!!” I joked to myself!!! I wished them well too and finally departed.

“That was very nice,” I thought “that was very nice indeed.”

The next section of the North Downs Way was very delightful and I was pleased to discover that my (now) “B” list celebrities really felt like they were on the mend. There was still a degree of pain with every step, but compared to a couple of days before it was “a walk in the park”… only now I was in the hills and making my way through the woodlands. The ground was quite soft under foot and so I finally managed to get a bit of a pace up!

As I was following the footpath I passed a man sitting on a bench, taking a rest. He looked to be around sixty years old (and a young sixty at that) and was obviously out walking the North Downs Way as he had a “day rucksack” and all the correct kit that the “Serious Hiking Association” would recommend you take on a ramble. As I passed we greeted each other in the mutually respectful manner that people who participate in the activities of the “Serious Hiking Association” do.

I carried on for a short while and at one point I slowed slightly to take in the view. Just as I was preparing to engage myself in what was “top gear” for my journey thus far, I caught sight of the gentleman only a short distance behind me. I thought it was time to really see what my “B” list celebrities were now capable of doing and
so I started to walk at what would have been three quarters of my normal top speed pace. And... you’ll never guess what; as I continued, at what I felt was a very good tempo, Mister “I’m getting ready to collect my pension” was still catching me!!!

“He’s doing alright for himself,” I thought, very patronisingly as I looked back!!!

After another ten minutes or so, the young looking elderly fellow finally caught up with me and we began to walk along together. He made some introductions, and I did the same, and I was actually quite glad of the company. Usually when I’m walking I can’t bare to be talking all the time, but sometimes (and like in that moment) it makes a refreshing change from just one’s own thoughts.

He began to tell me about himself and it turned out he was a keen outdoors type (like myself) and was doing the North Downs Way in sections (much like the three lovely ladies I met the day before). He was going to be picked up, by members of his family who lived in the area, further along the path and he was looking forward to seeing them again and spending the night at their house. I have to admit, in the moment he told me that, I felt a tinge of sadness at not being able to see my own family at the end of the day too.

I told him a bit about myself and as the conversation developed he told me that he used to work for the civil service (I think?) many, many, years ago, but didn’t feel it fulfilled or challenged him enough. He decided to become a teacher and was fortunate enough to see a job advertised at a private boarding school in the Highlands of Scotland. He applied and luckily enough was the successful candidate!

Anyway, upon arriving at the school there happened to be another position available (which the school was finding difficult to fill as nobody appeared to be interested in taking up the role) as some kind of School Outdoor Education Teacher. It was basically the equivalent of what we would now term an Outdoor Pursuits Instructor. He informed the school that that was “right up his street” and he took the position immediately (and instead of the one for which he’d applied and had been accepted). And so, for the rest of his career he took pupils out for camping expeditions and adventures, in the Highlands of Scotland, and he testified to me that he’d had the most wonderful life ever since he made his life changing decision.

“How long did you work there for then?” I asked, being really impressed with his story.

“Oh, about thirty years and until I retired,” he answered.

“Thirty years in one job?! I couldn’t imagine that,” I said “The world’s a different place today, hey. When did you retire then?” I continued to ask.

“Oh, about fifteen years ago,” he said.

Now this got me thinking. If he’d spent fifteen years retired and thirty years working at the school, that’s forty-five years already by my calculation!!! Add on a few years spent (at least) in the civil service, before his career change, plus a bit of time spent at University, then you’re already looking at a time of nearing on sixty years... and that’s before he’s even had his childhood!!! He couldn’t have taken early retirement then, obviously, so how old was he?!!! And so I asked.
“I’m sorry for asking, but how old are you then?” I enquired, quite apologetically.
“Don’t be sorry at all! I’m seventy-five!” he declared, with immense satisfaction.

I was staggered! I was absolutely gob-smacked! You could have knocked my head off and kicked it into the clouds!!!

“You’re having a bubble bath mate! Seventy-five?! Gor blimey Squire, I’d never have known. I had you down for sixty going-on fifty-five!” I said, suddenly feeling dizzy on my feet “Well, I tell you what, I hope I’m in the shape you are in when I (touch wood) reach seventy-five! Top drawer, that’s amazing!”

He appeared to enjoy the surprise, but I was sure he got that kind of reaction all the time. The thing was - even though I had problems with my “unmentionables”, and I was carrying a full backpack, I was still walking at a pretty impressive pace. I am a pretty fit bloke and, when I want to, I do move some (and at that time I was definitely in the mood for it), but this seventy-five year old was out striding me!!! And, I’ve got to be honest... I was struggling to keep up with him at times!!! Bloody old people!!!

It was so impressive... I was so impressed!

In that moment, that geezer was my hero, and he was everything that I aspired to be if I could reach that grand old age! Hope springs eternal hey! And you’d need at eternal spring in your step if you were going to keep up with that fellow!!!

We reached the edge of the woods and before us lay fields of golden barley, stretching out over the rolling hillsides and surrounded by beautifully deep green hedge rows and woodland. It was an exquisite sight. The rolling path went directly through the middle of the barley fields, and the golden crop approached waste height as you traversed.

I loved those moments, walking through there. I felt so at one and so at peace. There was no need for any words, just a need to absorb and to appreciate. The world was perfectly silent and the air stood still.

As we walked on further, we noticed that there was a chill in the air and that there were black clouds gathering around us. It looked as if we would soon be hit by the fall of rain, but I was still mildly optimistic that it might miss us. We pressed on, coming to the last barley field before a road at Cuxton. We saw waves of heavy rain, making their way towards our position from the distance, and the first fine droplets of water began to fall around us. We quickened our pace accordingly, but half way across the field the gentleman stopped suddenly and pulled out his mobile phone.

“The road ahead is where I’m going to be picked up. I’ll wish you goodbye from here,” he said.

It was a strange and immediate way to say goodbye, but I obliged and wished him well too. I figured that he may not have wanted to risk going all the way to the roadside with me, just in case the heavens may have opened up as his family arrived in their car. That would’ve left him in an awkward position of possibly being rude by not offering me a lift and some shelter. I didn’t know that for a fact, but it was a feeling I had because the farewell was so sudden and felt so peculiar.
It was cool with me though and I didn’t mind. I continued on, and sure enough, just as I reached the edge of the barley field, the heavens opened and it began to rain like I have rarely seen rain before.

I quickly took my backpack off and affixed its special orange “go-faster” waterproof cover. I then proceeded to put my own “waterproof” on, only it didn’t turn out to be waterproof at all... just mildly splash proof! As I approached the road (near to Cuxton) I saw a car slowly making its way along the lane and I guessed that that was the old(!!) man’s family.

“Lucky him!” I thought!

You could see the waves of rain, coming in across the hills, and the visibility reduced quite remarkably. The clouds looked heavy and black, and the light was suddenly almost that of dusk. It was suddenly as if the sun had given up the ghost of shedding its light and had retreated into a bunker!

A wind had picked up and started to blow the rain horizontally, soaking me in moments, and I crossed the road to follow the path up along the side of Mill Hill Wood. At this point the path backs onto some gardens, which boast six foot high fences bordering the path. It appeared to be quite sheltered and so I decided to stay there for a while, at least until I thought the worst of the weather had passed.

After about fifteen minutes, however, it was clear that this would not be the case. As the trees above me became more and more saturated, the safe haven that I had found lost all of its “U.N. Peace Keeping” status and I discovered that it wasn’t such a “safe haven” after all!!! I was forced to move on because it had suddenly become a case of either: getting soaking wet while walking and getting somewhere or getting soaking wet while standing and getting nowhere!!! It had also suddenly got quite cold.

I carried on, by the side of the woods and through the fields. The path through that section, even in the rain, was quite beautiful and I had found myself reasonably well sheltered (though still getting wet) for most of it. I eventually came out by a small car park and the heavens just went up into another gear of precipitation. It absolutely fell down and now it was to the accompaniment of crashes of quite terrifying thunder and lightning.

“My God!” I thought!

Seeing as the heavens had “upped their game” once more, I thought I’d seek shelter (once again) and found a spot underneath some trees by an electric meter box. Yeah, I know what you’re thinking now – “Good idea batman!” with a distinct trace of sarcasm! But it was fine, and for ten minutes or so it kept me dryer than I would otherwise have been. After that, however, the rain penetrated even its deep canopy and I had no choice but to brave the “monsoon” once more.

I followed the path, just a bit further, and gained my first views of the M2 as it crossed the River Medway. It looked like quite an impressive sight, but then I was slightly gutted to find that the path then went through an underpass (underneath the “A” road above it) which I could’ve been sheltering in for the past quarter of an
hour instead! I took the opportunity to “take harbour” there and, after a short while, the rain began to ease and I waited for a little while longer before the heavy rain ceased altogether and light drizzle began to ensue.

Seeing that I was already wet it seemed pointless to wait any longer. I continued on and followed the path across a flyover. I then saw that the path came out beneath the flyover and stretched out over the M2 Bridge before me.

From the position I was in I could see another wave of heavy rain approaching only this time it appeared to resemble a bank! It was coming fast and so I took a short cut by jumping over the crash-barrier (by the roadway) and descending down the embankment to seek shelter on the path as it passed underneath the flyover crossing the M2. Sure enough, and literally within seconds of me arriving there, a full blown electric storm began and it was of the like that I have never experienced before.

The sound of the thunder literally “battered” the flyover and I could feel the solid concrete walls (and almost see the bridge itself) vibrate from its powerful sound waves. I have to admit, I actually found it quite frightening! The sound impulses felt like bombs were going off and the echo underneath the bridge was staggering to behold.

“What power the natural world possesses!” I thought, and I wondered if I was actually safe taking shelter where I was. I honestly questioned the strength of the construction!

Of course it was fine, but it was just that the magnification of the sound, because of the “echoing” effect, made it appear all the more terrifying. It was a great experience though and I thoroughly enjoyed the fact that it made me a bit scared. It was almost like the sensation you get when you watch a scary movie!

There appeared to be no way that the storm was going to pass anytime soon, and so I decided to take off my backpack and settle in for the long haul. The rain was so intense that the precipitated water had formed a small stream along the pathway (underneath the flyover) where I was, and I had to strategically position myself against the concrete wall in order to keep dry. The ground was also very dirty and so I pulled out a plastic bag (from my backpack) so that I could sit on it. I wasn’t too uncomfortable.

The deluge, coupled with the fork lightening and thunder, made it feel like the end of the world was approaching. The light faded considerably and (I kid you not) this also added to the sensation of imminent “doom”! There was quite a cold breeze blowing through the small “tunnel” and I had to shield myself from it by repositioning my backpack. I was soaked right through and I thought that I had to put some dry clothes on otherwise I’d certainly get a chill from the damp and the sudden drop in temperature.

What had suddenly happened to the world?

As I took off the protective waterproof cover from my backpack, I was pleased to discover that it had done a fantastic job in keeping everything dry. The only damp
parts were the areas around where the straps were attached, and that was only because it was the run off area from my head!!!

I dried myself, put on some warm clothes and took my seat by the side of the M2. The storm continued to batter the landscape and the traffic rushing by was my only company. Mother Nature continued to let her presence be felt and it appeared that she was in no mood to take any crap! It seemed to me, on this day, that she was most definitely letting the world know who was the governor of this planet, and it certainly wasn't a life form with a pair of arms, a pair of legs and a muppet head!!!

I reached for my radio and sorted some company out for myself in the midst of my stranded isolation. I searched the radio frequencies and happened upon BBC Radio 2 and “Steve Wright in the Afternoon”.

“Ah, top drawer,” I thought.

It’s a peculiar thing I have with his show. I always think that Steve Wright is one of the most talented radio presenters this country (England) has ever produced, and whenever I listen to his show I always enjoy it immensely... but the thing is (and I don’t know why this is)... I never ever remember to tune in and I only ever seem to listen to it when I’m bored and when I stumble across it on the radio!!! It’s weird, or at least I find it so.

It was great to engage with him in that moment though and I was so pleased that he was on the air. He really has the ability to create an atmosphere of familiarity with you and whenever I “happen” upon his show, he always makes me feel like I’ve just bumped into an old friend. It’s a bit silly really, but it is also the truth.

And so, as I sat there (seeing out the storm) I began to reminisce about the days, in the nineteen-eighties, when he had his show on BBC Radio 1. I remembered the long hot afternoons when me and my family used to have his show on as we sat on the beach at Pentewan Sands in Cornwall, enjoying our annual family holiday and the usual beach time activities of sun bathing, drinking tea and eating sandwiches!!!

Of course, we did more than that (sometimes we’d even have a pasty!), but my memories of those days, connected to Steve Wright, were always of the lunch time moments because the rest of the day I spent in the sea and exploring the wonderful (and exciting) Cornish coastline. What was wonderful about the radio jogging my memory at that point though, was that those were the moments (the times when my Nan used to get out her ever so well prepared beach picnic) when all the family (and friends) used to be together. They were the most warming memories. I closed my eyes and I imagined that I was sitting there on the beach again... and had a smile upon my face.

I went onto remember how much times had changed since those days. Since the late nineteen-sixties my entire extended family (and some of our friends) used to journey every year (for our annual “two week” camping holiday together), overnight and by convoy, from the East End of London to Cornwall. Over fifty of us used to go, in a fleet of between ten and fifteen cars, along the old roads of the A30 and A303
to the West Country.

It was a wonderful thing to live and experience. I remembered that everyone, who lived in Essex, used to meet at my late great Aunt June’s in Barking and from there the convoy would travel to Stepney (in order to gain it’s complete accompaniment). After that it would be straight through Central London and onto the West Country roads to Cornwall.

Back in those days the “A” roads used to be single carriage ways and so the journey used to take between eight and ten hours (with no traffic!). I remembered that we used to always leave, to head through London, at a time of around midnight. Every year I used to force myself to stay awake until I had seen Big Ben and then the next thing I used to remember was being awoken to see Stonehenge, before I immediately fell back to sleep again! And then, somehow, I always used to wake up at the point where we hit traffic on the A30, and just as we approached Jamaica Inn. It was always very special at that point on Bodmin Moor. I always felt like I was on holiday (properly) by that time, and that it was great to be back in the magical and inspiring land which is Cornwall.

Those holidays were fantastic times, with everyone being on the beach together, going out together and generally having fun together. Those days had finished by the mid to late nineteen-eighties though, and my immediate family were the last ones to continue the tradition of going to Pentewan Sands for our annual holiday.

It was sad, but in 1991 my second cousin Sharon (who still held great family values and was my great Aunt June’s daughter) tried to re-instate the tradition and managed to get around thirty of the family (and some new friends) to go again.

Unfortunately, not everyone had the time to take two weeks off of work and few people wanted to camp anymore. Most wanted to stay in static caravans and so Sharon had no choice but to book them so that everyone was, at least, still together. But it didn’t make any difference being in close proximity. The isolation the caravans created meant people weren’t doing things together anymore and “the family” did things more in independent groups rather than mixing and joining in with each other.

It became apparent (during the holiday) that it was more and more of an effort for Sharon to get everyone together as an extended family and people just splintered off into their own immediate ones. It appeared more and more that people preferred to do “their own thing”. The television, in some of the caravans, seemed to attract most of the attention and it was certainly given more of a priority by some people.

Our family had broken apart, and as much as Sharon tried to address it, there was little she could do. Unfortunately, by 1991 (and I think because of all that had happened to our society during the nineteen-eighties) England was a different place. It, and our family, had been destroyed.

“Margaret Thatcher has got a lot to answer for,” I thought, and I was back to thinking about the rain and the end of the world again!!!

Blimey, isn’t it strange where your thoughts go?!!!
The “Non-Stop Oldies” were now playing on the radio and I enjoyed a few of the tracks. The rain appeared to clear a little and I got up to see what the weather looked like in the distance. It looked a bit brighter, further afield, but as I viewed the pathway (along the M2 bridge going over the River Medway) I knew that I couldn’t risk crossing it until I was absolutely sure that the rain had passed. The crossing looked immense from where I was standing, a good half mile or so, and I thought that it would be awful to get caught in the middle if another down pour of rain decided to fall.

I consistently alerted myself to condition of the rain – how heavy it was; if it was clearing; whether or not there were breaks coming in from afar? – and on two separate occasions (during the proceeding two hours) I lifted my backpack, as the rain turned to drizzle, and attempted to cross the M2 Medway bridge only to be thwarted fifty yards into my attempted crossing by the resurgence of torrential rain!

“Bugger,” I kept thinking to myself, but then counted my blessings that each time I made an attempted crossing, I was only a short distance away from shelter after having to turn back once more.

As much as I liked Steve Wright, I was starting to become quite impatient about the length of time I was stuck in that place! All the while I was feeling the cold breeze blowing around me in the “wind tunnel” and the noise of the traffic did it’s best to “drown out” the sound of my radio.

Afternoon turned into early evening and Steve Wright made way for Simon Mayo. I’d been held steadfast for almost three hours, thus far, and it was only now that there seemed to be an end in sight. The rain was clearing… or was it?

“Should I take a chance and go for it?” I thought “Would it be third time lucky or would it be time for the Muppets?!” I continued to think, but then I thought “Sod it… I have to go and if it rained again, then it rained… and I’ll just have to get wet.”

I’d had enough of waiting and so I strapped my backpack on once more, and made a beeline for the other side. Very slight drizzle accompanied me across the bridge, but it wasn’t too bad and I was able to take in some wonderful views of the River Medway and of Rochester Castle in the distance. I was lucky though, because by the time I reached the other side the drizzle had stopped and I could distinctly see brightness showing its head in the distance. Was the Sun about to strike back?! I hoped so!!!

The path, on the other side of the River Medway, follows a somewhat “disused” tarmac road, which runs adjacent to the M2, and then heads off up a small incline into a field. It then continues by the side of some hedgerow and hugs the edge of some woodland. Because of my over exuberance earlier on in the day, my “celebrities” had regained their “A” list status and were starting to give me some jip. It was ok though, I rolled with it and it was no drama, even if they were attempting to be a couple of queens!
I carried on listening to Simon Mayo’s show, with my headphones on, while I walked, as I was quite enjoying the entertaining company. It helped to drown out the noise from busy M2 too, because I was hiking very close to the motorway at that point.

I was wondering where I should head for, in order to gain supplies and camp that night, and so I consulted my map. I found that a village called Boxley was close to the trail and the map indicated that it had both a pub and a public phone box. It looked a reasonable distance away (from where I was) and I thought that I’d treat myself to a pub meal that evening, for a number of reasons. Firstly - I needed to dry myself out; secondly - I needed to warm up; thirdly - I felt like a proper hot meal and a fine pint of English Ale; and fourthly - because there was still rain in the air and I thought that I’d be stupid to consider doing anything else!

The North Downs Way eventually leads back to the Pilgrims Way proper, on this section, but there was a point where there was a divide in the paths again. One path went up to follow the brow of the hills along the North Downs range and another little track continued on the flat, and in the direction I wished to head.

I looked at my map, and looked at the hills and then thought “Sod that, I’m not making that kind of effort this late in the day!!!” I then left the North Downs Way and continued along the track that ran adjacent to the hills, but on a "level" and so it was easy going. It was a bit muddy, with deep puddles along it (because of the heavy rain earlier), but it didn’t matter to me because my shoes were already wet anyway. The cool water also had the bonus of soothing my feet and turning my short lived “A” listers back into “B” listers again!

From the low level track (that I was on) I could see very clearly the hills of the North Downs to my left. They were well covered in woods and I enjoyed taking in the lush green view of them as I walked parallel. I wasn’t sure if the track I had taken was actually the real “Pilgrims Way” at the time, but as I came out onto a road (nearing Boxley) I discovered a sign saying that the road was called “The Pilgrims Way”.

The track (on which I had been walking) ran on a straight line with the road (because the road had actually turned a right angled corner to align with it) and so I assumed that I had just been traversing the Ancient Pilgrims Way throughout that section of the path. “Happy days,” I thought, and it made me doubly glad that I had deviated from the North Downs Way a mile or so before.

I carried on, along the roadway, and then took a right turn towards the village of Boxley. It was now a very cool evening and I was so pleased to see the sight of the Red Lion Inn as I approached the village centre. It looked like a beautiful pub, only one that appeared to have turned itself into more of a restaurant (rather than a purely “imbibing” establishment) in order to survive. There were many cars in the pub car park outside and so that was a sure sign that it was popular, and undoubtedly, very nice.
I walked in, with a touch of the “drowned rat” look about me, and immediately saw that the place was quite full. I didn’t exactly fit into their usual model of customer for a cool Tuesday evening and so I politely asked the barmaid if I could sit at a table (it looked like a place where you may have had to book a table in advance, because it was so busy). She gave me a warm smile and said:

“Yes of course... if you can find one!”

I trundled around the bar, looking for a table that was a little bit out of the way, and tried not to disturb the other patrons with my big clumsy backpack. I was getting some strange and awkward looks as I ambled around, but I didn’t let it bother me. I eventually found a table near to the back of the pub, but after I got myself settled in I realised that there was a bit of a draft and it was quite cold. I really didn’t need that because I had to “dry-out” and when I went to the main bar, to purchase my pint of ale, I noticed a table by the window (which had just been vacated) and so I quickly rushed to gather my things and relocate there.

This didn’t seem to go down too well with the existing “Tuesday evening dinner” clientele and I went onto receive a number of “cold” stares as I found my way through the tables with all my baggage once again! I could understand why, and I gave my profuse apologies as I went, because some of the gangways were quite tight and the last thing you want, when you’re eating your tasty “Steak and Ale” pie, is some Cockney barging through with his backpack, jogging your elbow and knocking your fork out of your hand just as you’re about to take a mouthful and consume it!!!

I sounded like the quintessentially English “Tom” (James Fleet) in a scene from “Four Weddings and a Funeral” in that moment – “Sorry, sorry, I’m so sorry... sorry!” and “Sorry! I’m ever so sorry, sorry... I am sorry,” I think you get the picture!!!

I resettled at my new table, which was also by a radiator, and I strategically arranged my things so that they had a chance to dry out. Not too messy, but just draping my “waterproof” over a chair, putting my backpack close to the radiator and opening it up so that it could air. I bought my pint of lovely English ale, served at just below room temperature (and so you can fully appreciate the flavour) and ordered a meal. Do I really need to say what it was? Of course not, we’ve been there already and there wasn’t a fork jogged en-route!

I returned to take my seat and enjoyed the bliss of being in “civilisation” again. It was a lovely pub and I had an ever so lovely seat by the window. I took my book out, and began to read, while I awaited the delivery of my pie and chips (along with a few peas!). A short time later, however, the barmaid came over to me and told me that because the kitchen had been so busy that evening, they’d actually run out of chips, and, if I didn’t mind, could they give me mash instead? What did she mean if I didn’t mind? She was offering me “Pie and Mash” and I wasn’t even in East London or Essex!!!

“Top drawer love, bring it on,” I thought, and then I said that that would be fine as long as I could have some liquor. She looked at me with a confused expression,
obviously not getting the joke, and so I just left it by saying “Don’t worry,” and didn’t bother to explain.

There were a couple of local lads standing at the bar and chatting with the barmaid, and every now and then they would look over to me sitting there. They probably thought that I was a right sight and sure enough, when I looked up and caught eye contact with them, they proceeded to give me a “dig”.

“Have you been swimming then?” one of the lads asked, quite comically.

“No, just paddling!” I quickly replied!

We all laughed, and went on to have a little bit of banter, and it was really nice of them to make the effort and acknowledge me. They were basically “checking me out” and “inviting me into their conversation”, but because of the day I’d had I wasn’t in the mood to talk and I was grateful when my meal arrived and they politely left me in peace to eat. I really don’t mean that to sound horrible in any kind of way, because they seemed like good lads who would’ve been fantastic company at any other time. It was just that, in that moment, I was in a mood to be quiet and quiet with my own thoughts… or the lack of them. It had been that kind of day. But what it did do was to further illustrate the fact that in a proper and civilised English pub… you are never a stranger for long!

Top drawer, I love it!

After I finished my delicious meal, I decided to “hold out” in the pub until about nine o’clock. It still looked pretty dismal outside and I was in no rush to leave the warmth of my surroundings. I studied my map to see if there looked like a reasonably good spot to camp close by. Just passed the Church, in Boxley, looked promising. There was a path leading in the direction of the Pilgrims Way and so I thought that heading in that direction would be the best bet. I got another pint and continued to read my book.

The pub cleared, pretty quickly, as people finished their meals and departed. It seemed a shame, but that (I guess) is now the nature of things because most people drive to the pub and can no longer stay and have a drink after their meal. At a time of just after nine o’clock, I finished my pint and went over to the bar in order to ask the barmaid if she could refill my bottles with water. She happily did so and I then asked if it was possible to purchase some milk (as I needed some for my breakfast and tea in the morning). She said it wasn’t, and so I didn’t push the matter, but then another local (a middle-aged fellow) became a bit nosey about where I was off to.

“Where are you staying tonight?” he asked in a very “nosey” tone.

I immediately knew where this was heading and I now welcome you to the world of the British “nosey parker”. In case you’re not from the British Isles, or from its former English speaking colonies around the world, I’ll enlighten you further about the type of person that this phrase describes…
Basically, a “nosey parker” is someone who intrudes in other people’s affairs, when it doesn’t concern them, and for their own self-centred sense of self. They do not wish to help others in the situation they are “poking their nose” into for the benefit of the person or people involved, but rather wish to find out about a situation for their own voyeuristic ends and if that “situation” may affect them (even in the slightest) in some way, then they go into stage two of their “nosey parkerness” and attempt to manipulate the situation in order to impose their own judgemental (and limited) will. In short, they are the type of people who attempt to tell other people what to do, when it is not their place to do so.

Is that Crystal? Sorted!

Do you recognise that description? I’m sure they exist all over the world, but they are not people who are very well respected in England. However, we seem to have more than our fair share of them!!! And, from the tone of this fellow’s voice, it appeared I was standing right next to one in that moment…

“Oh, I’m camping,” I said, being polite, but also giving away as little information as I possibly could.

“What at the campsite down the road?” he continued to ask in a “what you up to” tone of voice.

“I saw that on the map, is it alright there?” I said, being truthful, but without answering his question.

“I don’t know, I guess,” he replied.

He then immediately started giving me directions to the camp site and telling me how to get there from where I was (I didn’t ask!), but the thing was, his directions were not in a tone of voice that was telling me how to get there in order to be helpful… he was actually using a tone of voice that was telling me to go there! As a result I didn’t listen to a word he said and just nodded my head thinking “You’re a twat, you’re a twat, you’re a twat,” and much like one of the scenes from The Office when Tim had had enough of Gareth’s self-important “patheticness” and said to him “You’re a cock, you’re a cock, you’re a cock!”

“It’s a bit late to get there now though,” he stated in the same tone and without any sense of caring about my wellbeing.

“Well, you never know,” I replied, and then “Goodbye then, have a nice evening,” very quickly, while sticking my thumb up as if it was my middle finger…

Ok, you’ll notice that I didn’t tell the fellow “where to go” during that brief encounter and that’s because I’ve learnt that, with these type of people, there’s no point. All they do if you do that is to turn the situation (they’ve created) on its head and make it look like you’re the aggressor or the trouble maker. So it’s not worth it. In life, I’ve found that the best way to deal with these “nosey parker” types is to play them at their own game… and then beat them at it! And you do that by giving away as little information as you can and by cutting off all avenues of their rude and ignorant
questioning.

It’s simple really, because in effect, they are usually very “simple” people.

... I then thanked the barmaid again (for the water top up) and she gave me a smile, while giving a quick raise of her eyebrows (as I think she detected the negative tone in the fellow’s voice too). I left the pub and as I crossed the road to go towards the church. When I looked back, I saw the man watching me from inside the bar. He’d actually walked to the window to spy on me and obviously knew that I was going to be camping wild, but I thought two things:

Number one - in England, if you are causing no harm to anyone, minding your own business and are not “disturbing the peace” then no-one has the right to ask you your business! Not even a Police Officer. That’s just how it is, and it’s the Law, Common Law, the Law of the Land.

Number two - if the geezer did have a problem with anything he thought I was doing (or was about to do) then he should have declared it straight out and not beat around the bush with his non-specific judgemental tone and questioning.

That kind of behaviour doesn’t earn any kind of respect with me. Where I’m from, if you’ve got a problem with someone then you go and have a word with whomever your problem is with, and if you don’t have the decency to have a straight word with them - then you don’t say a word. That’s just how it is, and it is like that because it is a direct and honest way to go about your business. Clear transparent communication. Job done, full stop, no misunderstanding.

And that’s why, in the moment when I looked around and caught the bloke having a “butchers hook” at me, I had no respect for him and I thought:

“Who do you think you’re looking at twat? If you’ve got a problem with anything I’m doing, then come and have a word or sit back down in your chair.”

I’ll be honest with you, and as you can probably tell, he (and his big nose) wound me up a little bit! I’m not perfect and I’ve never said I was.

As I looked directly back at him, and stared, I saw him turn and go back to the bar. I then let my annoyance go and went on to walk past the church.

It was so picturesque passing through this way. There was a little “avenue” of sorts leading from the pub up to the church. As I found the trail it took me around the outside of the churchyard and out into the fields beyond. I say that it was picturesque, because it most definitely was, but looking out over the churchyard wall as I passed, it was also a touch eerie at that time of the evening.

As the dusk was setting in, and after the long wet day, a light mist appeared to be forming around the grave stones! There was certainly a little bit of an atmosphere forming in reality... and in my imagination! Not in a scary “Night of Living Dead” type of way, but more in keeping with “Shaun of the Dead”! I mocked a ghostly “Whoo” to myself and made myself smile. I couldn’t believe that anything
horrible could ever happen in a little village as beautiful as Boxley, but then I thought “That’s how all the films start!” and decided to walk a bit faster!

I was in full on “Campsitse Search Mode” and I wasn’t looking for the one I had seen on my map! As I walked further and further away from the village, I felt more comfortable about the pitching possibilities. I was walking through some open grassland and fields. Some spots (that I had already passed) looked pretty enticing, but they were just too close to the possibility of being disturbed by a “nosey parker”. The bloke had actually made me feel a bit more “vigilant” than normal and I wondered if he had, in fact, been a farmer and that he was just looking out for his own land.

And that would have been fair enough, but there is another thing that I do just in case that kind of circumstance arises. If a farmer ever does discover me, and is not happy about my presence in his field, then I always have a Bank of England £10 Promissory Note standing by in my pocket just in case it’s required. I always figure that if a landowner is grossly put out by the liberty of me staying a night in his or her field, and isn’t convinced by my polite explanation, then I can always offer the note by way of compensation. I think of it as a gesture of good will and I believe that to be fair.

Just as the light was finally about to fade, I found a spot in a wide open field. It was overlooked by a house in the distance, but I decided that it was ok. I quickly began my evening routine (less the burner for cooking) and settled in for the night. I was right on the public footpath and I couldn’t see how anyone would have a problem with me being there. But if there was a problem… please refer to the above!

I was pleased to discover that the land had drained quite well, since the fall of all the rain earlier, and that it felt ever so soft as I got into my bed and lay down.

“This is nice and flat,” I thought, and then I nodded off to sleep.
Below Left: The Vigo Inn
Below Right: Where I departed company from the 75 year old gentleman

Left:
Path entrance where the heavens opened!

Right:
Where I briefly sheltered from the rain

Above Left: View of the M2 as it crosses the River Medway
Above Right: Where I sheltered from the storm
Below Left: The long path over the Medway Bridge
Below Right: The Kings Arms, Boxley – where I had dinner and recuperated

Above Left: View of Boxley Church (across the road from the pub)
Above Right: Path by the Church yard

Above Left: North Downs in the distance
Above Right: Fourth night’s camp site
Day 5 – Wednesday 29th June, 2011

It was a cool but sunny morning when I awoke and I was eager to make an early start. If the truth be known, I didn’t feel entirely comfortable where I was and sure enough a lady, walking her dog, passed by as I was implementing my morning routine. She smiled at me, as I said hello, but I was clearly not the sight she expected to see on her early morning stroll. I had no milk and so I thought that I’d delay breakfast until I came across a village shop.

I looked at my map and saw that a place called “Detling” looked of a reasonable size to accommodate a village shop and it was also just a short distance away on the path. After I’d packed, I followed the path I was on further along and then took a left turn in order to rejoin the Pilgrims Way proper.

The path led to, and through, a part of Detling and you come to a very busy dual carriage way which is the A249. As I came to the edge of the road I noticed that there were two means by which to cross it. One was by a long footbridge to my left and the other was directly across the busy road, but with no pedestrian crossing lights or zebra crossing markings. The roadway crossing was literally just a lowered curb leading into the four-lane highway with quite a large (and grassed) central reservation area in the middle.

For a moment, I considered crossing by the roadway as it was the shortest distance to take, but seeing the traffic was “whizzing” by me at such frequency, I had no hope of safely getting across and there was no way that I was going to take the risk. I looked at the long winding bridge and thought “Bugger,” and then I conversely thought “Thank God that’s there!”

As I approached the footway I saw a sign, and a donation box, and discovered that the bridge I was about to cross was called “Jades Crossing”. As I found my way, and walked across the bridge, I became quite curious as to why it was called “Jades Crossing”. On the other side I found my answer and there was a plaque with some information written about it. I stopped to read it and then I found that I was quite moved by what it said:

Jades Crossing

This footbridge is the result of a twenty year campaign by the People of Detling. It was constructed following the deaths of Jade Hobbs and her Grandmother Margaret Kuwertz who were both killed crossing this road on Saturday 16th December 2000. This brought the number of pedestrians killed at this crossing to four. The A249 is now a strategic dual carriageway linking two motorways. Built in 1962, it cut the village of Detling in two. No provision was then made for a proper pedestrian crossing at this focal point of the Pilgrims Way and the North Downs Way footpath.
Funds for this footbridge were raised from public subscription, by Maidstone Borough Council and Kent County Council. In making a donation and using this safe crossing you will be helping the Jade fund maintain its work in helping to make our roads safer for all.

This crossing is dedicated to those pedestrians who have died crossing the A249 here at Detling...

Jade Hobbs  
Aged 8  
16th December 2000

Margaret Kuwertz  
Aged 79  
16th December 2000

Souraya Hutchinson  
Aged 74  
16th December 1986

Fred Mall  
Aged 74  
23rd December 1974

Rest In Peace

“How much we care for our cars, how little we care for our communities”
There was a beautiful picture of Jade on the plaque and it really brought more meaning to the story. She looked like such a wonderfully happy girl in the photo. She looked like a girl with so much spirit, and I could feel it, as I stood there. In moments like that you can only wonder how you would feel if that was your sister, your daughter, your niece... or... your grandmother, your mother, your wife. I was very touched as I contemplated that and a little bit emotional I have to say.

Some people, who seem to dislike the showing of emotion (in all of its most beautiful forms), like to claim that people like me - who can feel their sensitivities and don’t mind showing it - are sentimental, self-indulgent and sometimes even weak in those touching moments. But that’s not the case at all, at least not from what I’ve learnt through life. It is in fact, at moments like that, when you allow yourself the opportunity to connect. To connect with other human beings and their stories, and so, in effect, connect with your wider consciousness through your heart.

And to those who do regard that as a “weakness” then I say this: You are mistaken, because the ability to connect with others through our hearts is, in fact, our greatest strength.

So as I stood there, I didn’t mind “connecting” because it felt so natural for me to do so, and for me, it’s not the showing of emotion that is wrong, it’s only when you hold onto it. It is the very thing that appears to make us human after all, and if you allow it to flow through you, then it cannot cause any blockages. It’s only when you hold onto the emotion that the blockages can occur. Common sense really, and if you look at it that way, then what’s the problem? At least... that’s how I see it.

I stood there for a while because I found myself considering other aspects of the story. First of all, I thought about the lack of care that the “decision makers” appeared to have had for Detling and its community. How they saw fit to literally cut (and divide) a whole village in two, without providing any adequate means by which it could be safely reconnected and made accessible again. Secondly, it made me think about the power a community has when it decides to unite, in order to do the right thing, and make something positive happen. I found it very inspirational.

It reminded me of a story I was told when I was in a village called Calstock in Cornwall. Calstock is only a small place and is situated by the side of the River Tamar. It is a pretty little place, which has an alluring charm about it, and it boasts one of Brunel’s impressive viaducts as its main focus of attention. It is a traditional Cornish village, in many ways, and (to this day) retains a tight and close knit community.

Most of the housing in the village is still that of the original Cornish cottages and houses dating back to the nineteenth century when Calstock was a wealthy mining town. The road (and housing) layout is still much of that era and comprises of small single track “highways” throughout the centre of the village. As a result there are few areas of “on street” parking available for cars outside of people’s homes.
Instead, the village has a main car park in which all the residents (and their visitors) park their vehicles in, for free, and this is something that is seen in the village as a right. As I was told, a number of years ago, the local “authority” attempted to introduce “parking meters” into the village and take away the “right” for local residents to park freely (in their own village) in order to raise revenue. The community objected, but the local “authority” persisted and installed the machines regardless.

Not taking this lying down, members of the community (with the support of the rest) poured super-glue into the slots of these parking machines so that they were rendered disabled. As a result no “pay and display” tickets could be purchased and so the local authority could not issue any “parking tickets” to further increase their revenue.

The local “authority” didn’t take this lying down either, and immediately set to replacing the parking meters (as apparently they were impossible to repair) giving threats of prosecution if they were “vandalised” again. The community didn’t take this lying down, and so, super-glued the shiny new machines once again! I think that this cycle may have actually occurred on a third occasion, by which time the local “authority” had to give up because the exercise was becoming too expensive and (because the community was “sticking” together) they couldn’t find the culprits!

The Calstock community had basically told the local “authority” to “bugger off” and refused to allow it to interfere with their natural way of life.

I loved that story when I heard it, and as I stood there remembering, I saw that it had a parallel to the one that I had just read. It was the parallel of the power that communities possess when they stand together and challenge the decisions of an “authority”, an “authority” which seemed to care little for their wellbeing and appeared not to have their “best interests” at heart.

“What was the moral of these stories?” I asked myself “When people stand together, for what they know to be right, they take their power back.” That was the answer I came up with, pretty instantaneously.

I lingered for a bit longer, taking in the photo of Jade, and then I put my donation in the slot. How much? That’s always a question I ask myself when I make contributions like that. There’s not a correct answer, is there? I suppose it relates more to how much you’ve got and how much you feel is right for you at the time. For me, in that moment, a fifty pence piece did the trick.

I wandered down into the village and then began my search to find a shop. It was approaching nine o’clock, and so there were a number of cars milling about as people went off to work and took their children to school etcetera. I couldn’t see anyone walking in the main street of the village, so when I saw a car crawling along the road (by the side of me and very slowly) I took the opportunity to cheekily “flag it down” and ask the driver where the village shop was.
The driver was a lady, perhaps in her late thirties, and she didn’t seem to mind stopping the car briefly to wind down her window and ask what it was I wanted.

“Excuse me, I’m ever so sorry to disturb you, but do you live in this village?” I asked immediately, just to verify whether or not she had the knowledge concerning what I wished to ask or was just driving through the village on her commute.

“Err yes, why’s that?” she answered.

“Oh brilliant, I just wondered if you could let me know if there was a village shop here and where it was?” I explained.

“Oh, no problem. It’s just a bit further down the road, on the left. It’s not very far, you can’t miss it,” she said seemingly pleased that she was able to help.

“Ah, top drawer!” I exclaimed “Thanks ever so much.”

“No problem,” she said again “That’s alright,” and then she headed off in her car once more.

“Great stuff,” I thought, I could (at last) buy some wholesome milk so that I could finally have my breakfast. I was getting quite hungry by that point! I was relieved to find out that there actually was a shop in the village, because thus far on my Pilgrimage it was becoming more and more evident that a lot of these village amenities had disappeared in Kent. I found it quite shocking to be honest.

Throughout all of my experiences, hiking through other parts of the British Isles, I could usually always bank on there being a shop in most of the small villages that I would pass through, but here in Kent it seemed to be a rarity. I thought that much of Kent’s close proximity to London probably had something to do with it. I assumed that a lot of people probably commuted to their jobs by car (and to London) each day, and did all of their shopping at supermarkets en route (to and from work), and so failed to support their local Village Shop or Post Office. That’s the obvious explanation, but I’m sure there are others.

I was thinking this as I was walking along Detling “High Street” and until I came upon a building which had a shop front... but... had no shop in it!!! I looked through the window and saw that the building still had some of its retail “fixtures and fittings”, but there was nothing else. No products, no till and certainly no people. It felt a bit ghostly actually and I was a bit taken aback.

“Surely this couldn’t be the shop the lady told me about, could it?” I wondered, and then looked further along the street, but saw nothing that gave the impression of another retail establishment. I did see an elderly lady walking towards me, however, and so I thought I’d ask her if the shop was further along the road. As she approached, I politely asked her and I was shocked by her reply.

“No, that was the only shop in Detling, dear, but it closed down about six months ago,” she said.

SIX MONTHS AGO!!!!!!... SIX MONTHS!!!
I couldn’t believe it! Not the fact that it had closed down, but the fact that the other lady (who said she lived in the village!) had just given me directions to it and was completely oblivious to the fact it had been closed... for six months!!!! It’s not even a big place (Detling) and even if you don’t use the village shop, or even talk to other people in your own “community”, surely you would notice if the shop was still in existence (or not) as you drove past in your car every day. Wouldn’t you?

How disconnected from their own communities had people become?!!! How little did people interact and talk with each other anymore? I was flabbergasted. It floored me, it really did. I don’t know about six months, but I tell you what, hearing that completely knocked me for six! I was stunned mate. I was absolutely stunned.

There was a bench nearby and I took the opportunity to sit down. I took my backpack off and did so. I sat there for a while, just to try and comprehend what had just taken place. WHAT THE FUCK WAS HAPPENING TO MY COUNTRY!!!!!

All thoughts of my breakfast had gone and I went onto remember a time that I was at a business function the year before. For a brief period I was the Community and Business Development Manager for a family run training company based in Barking and Dagenham. As part of my role I attended numerous business events in order to promote the company and its ethos of doing its best to help people by developing their skills and awareness...

It was a time of just before the General Election and political issues appeared to be high on most people’s agendas. I was talking to a gentleman about my role, and he happened to ask me what I thought was the biggest reason for the breakdown of our communities.

To be honest, I think it was a bit of a loaded question because he knew that I was from Barking and that the British National Party had targeted the area (during the General Election) as they had seen it as their best opportunity to gain a seat in the House of Commons because of the high levels of immigration the constituency had experienced.

Well, I took a moment to consider and then I gave my response, of which, he appeared to be extremely surprised...

“THE biggest thing that has destroyed our communities?” I said slowly, and with a reflecting tone ”The motor car!” I declared.

He had the look of astonishment about him and after a short pause for thought, he smiled, and I continued to explain.

“It’s because of the motor car that people have been able to live further and further away from their place of work, and also from their families and the areas in which they grew up. It’s because of the motor car that people spend less and less “quality” time interacting with their families, friends and acquaintances (because they don’t live close by to them anymore) and spend more and more time travelling in between places for longer and longer distances. So much so, that it comes to a point where they’ve hardly got any time left to spend with their families and in their
own communities, and even if they do, sometimes they can be too tired from all the travelling to even make the effort!!!

And that’s not to mention the way that new housing estates seem to be built in a way which prioritises the motor car (and it’s accessibility to road links and “out of town” shopping areas) rather than focusing on a style of housing which emphasises the creation of communities and the encouragement of the opportunities for people to interact with each other!!!

And then there’s the roads that go through and destroy existing communities, with decent housing being knocked down to make way for them. It’s all nonsense! It winds me up!” I ranted.

I remember really going into one and I had no idea where it all came from! Even though I’d never considered the question from that angle before, the knowledge was all there (from all of my experiences in life) and it was as if... in that moment... I put it all together.

“But, in short, the answer is the motor car because it (and it’s motorways) have fundamentally allowed people to live further and further away from their place of work,” I finished in a moment of summary. The gentleman gave me a big smile and then laughed, while shake my hand and patting me on the back. I think he liked my answer!

When I “came back” from the memory and re-entered the “real world” all I could do was shake my head at the ridiculous state of affairs we had allowed ourselves to get into. And here, in this community at Detling, you appeared to have all of evidence for the truths that I’d just thought about since I had traversed Jades Crossing. It all seemed to be clearly epitomised by the consequences of a “motorway” being built straight through the heart of a village and literally dividing it in two.

“What was the answer?” I wondered, and straight away the answer came to me... it was exactly what I was doing... walking!!! If everyone worked locally and they lived within walking distance of their employment (i.e. so that it was reasonably close to their home) then they’d have more time to spend with their families and they’d be in their own communities. Simple really. But the world is not “set-up” for people to live like that anymore, and that’s the real problem.

I recovered my deconrum and felt a rumble in my stomach! It’s was definitely breakfast time and so I wandered back along the street to join the Pilgrims Way, once again, and I hoped that I may be able to purchase some milk in the pub opposite to the junction of the road. I also cheekily thought that I could maybe even knock on someone’s door, to explain the situation, and see if they had any milk spare that they could sell me. Would that be ok? I thought it might be worth a try!

As I came to the group of houses, next to the lane that was the Pilgrims Way, a lady was going to and from her house and packing her car with horse riding equipment. I thought that this may be my opportunity, and anyway, what did I have
to lose.

“Excuse, I’m so sorry to disturb you, but I wondered if I could ask a question?” I said ever so politely.

She looked at me, a little inquisitively, and I half wondered if she thought that I was about to ask for her number and that this was a chat up line! She was quite an attractive lady as it happened.

“What’s that then?” she enquired.

“Well, I know this is ever so cheeky of me, but I’m hiking the Pilgrims Way and I haven’t been able to find a shop to buy some milk for my breakfast. So I just wondered, if you may have a pint spare that I could buy off of you by any chance? I know it’s peculiar, but I’m a bit stuck,” I explained.

She looked at me, I guess to make a judgement call, and probably in gladness that I wasn’t actually asking her out on a date!!! She then said that she’ll go into the house and have a look. A few minutes later she reappeared with a pint bottle of “silver top” (which was two thirds filled with milk) and handed it to me.

“Ah, thanks ever so much,” I exclaimed “How much do you want for it?” I asked while holding out a pound coin.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said “You can have it, enjoy!”

It was so nice and I couldn’t believe it, to be fair. I thanked her again and wished her well, then I set off on my way, this time with a milk bottle in hand! Within a few yards (and right at the point where the Pilgrims Way began again) I stopped. Before me was a very quaint and beautifully historic sight. It was a gateway, built with red bricks, and it had the aura of being extremely old. I stood for a few moments, to admire it, and then I went closer.

There was a sign (affixed by English Heritage) which explained more about the gateway and told of it being of Tudor origin. It said that after the murder of Thomas Beckett (at Canterbury in 1170), many pilgrims followed in the footsteps of Henry II to the Shrine of St. Thomas in Canterbury Cathedral. It went on to disclose that there were many resting houses built along the Way, so that pilgrims could take shelter, and that one probably stood behind the Tudor Gateway where it still stands today.

It was very interesting and it was the first “undiluted” sense of the ancient that I had felt along the Pilgrims Way thus far. I really felt in that moment that I was doing something quite extraordinary - that I was following in the footsteps of others, and I had the distinct sensation that I was somehow linked to those others, who had walked along the path before me. I almost had the sensation that they were all there with me, and that, I was no longer standing there alone.

It’s unusual thing to say, I’ll admit, and it’s hard to describe the feeling I had, let alone trying to justify it. All I can say is that you’ll just have to believe me when I say it. I know that there are some people who are going to argue that the feeling was created by my imagination after I read the English Heritage information, but the thing is, the sensation started BEFORE I had read the information and it began the
moment I saw the gateway. It certainly has a special feel about it and you most definitely get the sense of ages gone by. I was surprised that I didn’t notice the gateway earlier, when I walked past the lane before, but then again it was out of my line of sight and I was more focused on the directions the lady had given me for the village shop.

After an extended period of time, appreciating the Tudor Gateway, I set off along the tarmac lane which followed the Ancient Pilgrims Way. I was looking for a nice spot to prepare my breakfast, but because of the squarely cut hedgerows (which lined the lane either side of me) there was nowhere appropriate. I carried on walking (with my two-thirds full pint bottle of silver topped milk in hand), enjoying the sunshine and the fresh air. Every now and then, however, a diesel car would pass by and I was choked by its fumes (which always seem to linger longer than that of petrol engines).

It was a very pleasant walk along this part of the path and even though I was walking in a lane, and on tarmac, I was really enjoying being on the Pilgrims Way proper. I was looking forward to the fact that I would be on it for most of the rest of the day. I eventually came across a pub called the Black Horse Inn and there was a car park (with a grassed bank area) which looked like a nice place to have my breakfast. I saw that there were picnic tables outside of the pub, but seeing as I wasn’t buying anything, I didn’t feel that it would be right to use them. And anyway, I needed to set up my burner on some grass in order to make myself a cup of Earl Grey tea!!!

It was a very late breakfast and it was probably getting on for eleven o’clock. I was quite hungry by then, but I was enjoying the moment. There were flowers around me and the sun was shining brightly, but it had reached the point in the day where it had become too hot to sit directly in its rays. I relocated and found some shade by a signpost (and by the side of the lane) for the pub and its accommodation. As cars passed, people looked at me as I prepared my tea and muesli, and (for the most part) I received warm smiles as I returned peoples gaze.

As I finished my breakfast, I noticed that the pub’s kitchen was receiving a delivery, and so I thought I’d take the opportunity to go and ask the kitchen hands for a refill of my water bottles. I packed all of my stuff up and went over to ask. They were very friendly, and did so with the least amount of fuss, and I enjoyed a little bit of banter with them as they did so.

I then looked at my map and saw that the lane followed the Pilgrims Way for quite a distance and near to a village called Lenham. The village was a mile or so off of the path, but I thought that that would be the best place to head for in order to have lunch and refill my water bottles again later. It was turning into another very hot day and I knew that I had to be careful not to run out. With that decided I pressed on once more and went on to enjoy the beautifully quaint (and green) Kent countryside as I observed it from the long winding lane I was walking along.

I eventually reached the junction, for the turn off to Lenham, and I had to decide
whether to make the effort to go there or not. I consulted the map and saw that a
town called Charing was another three or four miles further on, and seeing as I still
had about two litres of water left, I decided that the round trip (off of the path, to
Lenham and back) wasn’t worth it. My celebrities (which had touched upon “C” list
status at the beginning of the day) were now making a bit of a populist come back,
and had regained the not so lofty heights of “B” list status once more.

“All out for Charing,” I thought.

Now, the next section of the Pilgrims Way is given a break from the imposition of
tarmac roads, and heads (quite naturally and upon its own steam) along a path that
is reasonably straight and flat. For some parts of this section (between Lenham and
Charing) it feels as if it has not changed one iota, not in just the past few centuries,
but for over a millennia. Put quite simply, some parts feel like they have stayed the
same for a time immemorial. It felt very ancient and extremely enchanting.

I have to say that it was this part of the Pilgrims Way, and this particular section
of the entire Pilgrimage on which I walked - all the way from the ruins of Barking
Abbey to Canterbury Cathedral - that I felt was the most special. It was
exceptional... everything about it. It was, and it fulfilled, every notion, every image
and every dream you could ever imagine about what a Pilgrimage was once like and
how the path must have looked and felt like to Pilgrims in the days of Chaucer and
beyond. It gave a magical feeling, because it was quite simply... magical.

For some parts of the Pilgrims Way, along this section, the path takes the form of
a track made from earth and stone, and is of a width equal to that of a horse
carriage. Trees align both sides, with mixtures of Oak, Hawthorn, Beech and Hazel.
A canopy is formed in the middle, sheltering you from... the sun... and the wind...
and the rain... and the stars. Gaps appear so that you may briefly see upon the
heavens, or you may just take in the momentary panoramic views of the fields and
hills around you.

Although the line of trees is sparse, looking along and in front of you, it gives the
impression of a forest and you feel like you are venturing through woodland. At any
moment you expect to see a woodsman ambling along in his medieval peasant wear
or a horse drawn wagon coming from the opposite direction. You feel as though you
are in Fairyland, in a time in between times, because time feels like it no longer
exists. This is how I feel I can best describe it... but there was something else too.

As I walked along parts of this section, the sensation that I experienced when I
was at the Tudor Gateway was magnified immeasurably. It’s hard to describe, and a
lot harder to make it sound believable, but as I walked I had the feeling that I was
not walking alone. I felt like there were others walking with me too, not just a few,
but dozens. I couldn’t see them and I couldn’t hear them, but I could feel them...
just across the veil of time... walking with me, even conversing. It was ever so
peculiar, but it felt real to me. I could feel their presence, in another time, but in the
same place.
The path continued to give me the sensation of the ancient and I had visions of the Green Man. The trees themselves even gave the impression of being consciously alive and I wondered if they themselves took walks along the path in the deepest of night! The whole ambience reminded me of scenes from “Lord of the Rings” and the impression’s I had felt very real...

(What I have just written is the truth of my experience, during that point of my Pilgrimage, and it’s up to you if you choose to believe it. It matters not to me. All that matters to me is that I convey the truth of what I experienced, as accurately as I can, and as honestly as I am able to do so. I do not desire to convince you of anything. I just wish to give you the benefit of my experience, because that is my truth... and it is for you to discover your own)

... I finally reached a point where I could turn off to Charing and I gazed upon a huge pasture, which looked open to public access, with paths embedded within its grassland. I departed from the shade of the tree canopy, which the Pilgrims Way offered, and entered into the sunshine (and the meadow) so that I could take a direct path across to a road (and a roundabout) where upon the town of Charing began.

My water bottles were empty by that time and I really needed a refill. I also needed some supplies and I hoped that there was a shop in Charing that was open. As I followed the road into town I enjoyed the ambiance. It appeared to be a very charming place and there was red, white and blue “ticker-tape” hanging from the rafters of the buildings all the way across and along the high street. I wasn’t sure if it had been put up in celebration of some event, or if it was just there for decoration. Either way, it helped to give me the impression that Charing was a very quintessentially English place!

I found a small mini-market (that was open) and purchased some supplies. I considered buying a gallon bottle of mineral water, but the price was a bit over the odds and so I opted to get some water elsewhere. As I left the shop, and headed further down the street to explore, I noticed a little vehicle entrance (into a residential car park/garage area) and saw a woman by the back of her house who was speaking on a mobile phone. I thought that I may as well go and ask her for a water top-up, and so I walked over to do so.

She seemed to be a very pleasant woman and after I’d approached her I waited for her to finish her conversation on the phone. She didn’t wait to finish her conversation herself, however, and in mid-dialogue she asked what it was I wanted. To begin with, I apologised for disturbing her, but then I explained my water situation (and lack of it!) and asked if it was possible for a refill. She looked at me (while continuing to talk on the phone) and then pointed to her outside tap, indicating that I could use it. But when we both looked at the tap, it was clear that it was a bit grubby (from garden use) and wasn’t particularly hygienic to gain drinking
water from.

She then hand signalled an apology to me (while still talking on the phone and explaining to her friend that she now had a backpacker with her) and then she “signed” for me to give her my bottles. She took them off of me, walked into her kitchen (while still talking to her friend on the phone!), went over to her sink and refilled my bottles one at a time (while continuing to talk and with much dialogue on the phone!). After she’d finished filling the bottles, the conversation with her friend finally ended and she hung up and put the phone down. She then picked up all my water bottles and walked across her kitchen to return the filled bottles to me. I expressed my gratitude and she said that it was fine because her son sometimes backpacked and so she was glad she could help. And just like that, and with no questions asked, I went on my way. Job done!

Where else on Earth would something like that happen? I love England so much!!!

It was around six o’clock in the evening and I was quite tired by that point, so I wandered over to the parish church and discovered a little green where I found a nice bench to rest and refresh myself at. The sun was still warm and I enjoyed the moments sitting there, staying for almost an hour while listening to my radio. It was a this point that I heard, announced on the radio news, that on Friday 1st July Essex County Cricket Club were playing Kent County Cricket Club in a floodlit Twenty20 match in Canterbury.

“What were the odds?” I thought, and I consulted my map to see how much farther I had to walk in order to gauge the time that it would take me to reach Canterbury from where I was. I figured that Friday would indeed be my estimated day of arrival and I wondered about going to see the game that evening. That’d be great I thought. I’d never seen Essex play at cricket before, and the fact that they were playing Kent made it a local derby! I wondered if Miriam would be up for going too, if I saw her, and then I thought about what I was going to do to meet her in Canterbury when I got there.

I generally don’t live a life that is planned, and before I left Barking I had only told her that I was walking to Canterbury and didn’t give any dates or times of arrival (because I didn’t know them). We’d only been in touch by email (as I didn’t have a mobile phone) and all I knew was the place in which she worked – the Farmers Market, in Canterbury. She’d let me know (by email) that she was due to leave Canterbury to hike across Dartmoor with her boyfriend on Saturday 2nd July, but that any time I turned up before then would be fine and that I would have a place to stay when I arrived.

I didn’t actually know where she lived, or the times that she worked, but just thought that if I was meant to meet her at the end of my Pilgrimage, then I would do so, and if I wasn’t, then I wouldn’t. Life is pretty simple to me like that, but the great thing was that if I wasn’t lucky enough to bump into her, I felt like I now had
a back-up plan – I could go to the cricket match and I might even be able to hitch a lift back to Essex from there.

I was sure that there would be plenty of people from Essex at the game, and they would all have to return home by the Dartford Tunnel. Some may even be heading towards Barking! Who knew... but it was definitely a plan! Happy in the knowledge of my unexpected development, I gathered my belongings and referred to my map, setting off on the path to rejoin the Pilgrims Way once more.

It was a beautiful evening as I walked out of Charing and entered the fields beyond. As I traversed across a public footpath, through the middle of a farmer’s crop field, I gained a slight elevation. I turned to absorb the wondrous view that was the scene back towards Charing. The air was crystal clear and the sunshine bathed the landscape, revealing its vibrant colours in all of nature’s glory. It was truly captivating and I didn’t wish to leave the spot on which I was standing. Eventually, and reluctantly, I turned to walk and join the Pilgrims Way “proper” again, continuing on my way.

It was a very lovely walk along the next section of the track. To the south I was boarded by fields, and to the north by woodland, and this enabled the evening sunshine to continually immerse me with its warmth in its fading light. I was in “camp site search mode”, but nowhere seemed to appeal as I walked. I consulted my map and noticed the ruins of a church someway in the distance. Something attracted me to it and I thought that that would be an appropriate place to head for. But it was two or three miles away and I felt it was too far for me to reach before night fall. It was already getting on for nine o’clock in the evening by then.

I persevered in my attempt to find a camp site as soon as possible, but the further I walked, the longer into the evening I ventured and the less light there was as dusk began to take hold. The Sun had finally departed for another day, and as the air became cooler, I began to walk faster!!! I was actually starting to become a little bit desperate. There seemed to be no spots along the path which appeared to be suitable and then I came upon an area of land (where the Pilgrims Way went through) which had numerous signs informing me that it was private land and to not leave the “public right of way”. The owners were obviously quite guarded about the possibility of “trespasser’s”.

I carried on, passing through some beautiful wheat (or barley fields), and came across a small woodland isolated in the middle of some fields (Skeat’s Wood). I found a little bit of grassed area, by the side of the path, and thought that this had to be it. It wasn’t ideal, and there were the same ”This is Private Land” signs in existence all around me, but the light was fading fast and I had to be quick in order to pitch my tent. I stopped, took off my backpack and unpacked my tent. I then began to erect it, but the lay of the land was terrible, with lumps everywhere, and it was very exposed.

“I can’t be having this,” I thought, and then I aborted the implementation of my evening routine.
I packed everything back-up and headed off on my way again, annoyed at myself for just wasting around ten minutes of the last dregs of daylight! My “unmentionables”, which (after my rest in Charing) had been relegated back to “C” list celebrity status, had now found their way back into the realms of the “B” list once more, because of the hammering they were taking as I ventured at pace along the path. They were starting to feel very aggrieved again, but I had no choice and had to ignore them as I carried on.

Just as I came out onto the other side of the wooded area, I saw the silhouette of a church tower, a little further ahead and in the distance.

“Is that the ruined Church?” I thought to myself, and then I consulted my map to check. It was!!! “Blimey,” I thought “I aint done that in bad time.”

A beautiful barley field laid out before me and the path meandered through it, almost giving me the sense of it being the Yellow Brick Road in the Wizard of Oz!

“We’re off to see the Wizard... the Wonderful Wizard of Oz, we hear he is a whiz of a whiz... if ever a whiz there was!!” I sang to myself as I gingerly skipped along the winding path knowing that the end of my day was finally in sight!

I came to a style at the end of the path, and by the edge of the field, and because it was isolated (with no fence or hedge attached!) I walked around it and saw the ruined church. I then saw another sign saying that I was on a private estate called Eastwell and it explained the rights of access... or rather, the lack of them!!!

“Bugger,” I thought “Whoever owns the land isn’t going to take too kindly to me staying here for the night!!!”

I walked a very short distance along the roadway to find a path that cut across a small enclosure (and a “natural” looking field) and which headed towards the grounds of the ruined Church. The field looked perfect and, although it was exposed to the roadway, I thought that this was me for the night. I couldn’t walk any further and it appeared to be so quiet where I was. It was past ten o’clock and I deduced that it was so late into the evening that I shouldn’t be disturbed on this night, and if I left first thing in the morning then no one would be any of the wiser for me being there.

I immediately set in motion my evening routine, pitching my tent directly on the pathway (but not blocking it because it was across an open field) and began to settle in for the night. I enjoyed my food and took my shower, before snuggling into my bed as the stars began to appear in the night sky. It was a beautiful spot I had found and I could see the silhouette of the church tower, outlined above the trees, in front of me.

After taking a glimpse of the church, and because of the proximity of the old churchyard to where I was camping, I ever so stupidly gave a spooky “Whoo”. The only thing was though, because I was there all alone, I ended up really scaring myself!!! I was such a muppet!!! I quickly zipped up my tent and lied there perfectly still, waiting to hear the slightest noise in the silence. And when I did here a noise I thought “What was that?! I quickly unzipped the tent again to poked my head...
outside and have a “butcher’s hook” around!

I closely examined the dark and “ghostly” shadows created by the dense tree canopy that surrounded the church... and then I saw... deep in one of the darkest shadows... absolutely nothing at all!!!

“Gor blimey! This was going to be a long night” I thought to myself.

And then I put my head onto my pillow and I couldn’t help but to fall asleep!!!
Right: A Memorial to Jade
Below: Jade’s Crossing

Right: The closed village shop
Below: The Pilgrims way at Detling

Left: The Tudor Gateway
Below: The Pilgrims Way from Detling
Right: The Pilgrims Way
Below: The Black Horse Inn

Above, Left and Right:
The Pilgrims Way continues
Above Left: Pilgrims way at Charing
Above Right: Charing High Street

Above Left: Path through Eastwell
Above Right: Looking west at Eastwell

Above Left: Ruined Church at Eastwell
Above Right: Fifth nights camp
Day 6 – Thursday 30th June, 2011

I awoke, a little bit later than planned, and heard the odd car pass on the road by the side of the field. I was in full view, but I didn’t care as I’d had my night’s kip and would soon be gone. I opened up the tent and took a view of the world once more. It was a delightful sight and it looked as if an equally delightful day was about to ensue.

I quickly got dressed and was curious to see the ruined church as I hadn’t had the chance to view it on the evening before. I took a little recce around it, and it was very peaceful, then I walked a little bit further down the lane to discover a small bridge over a stream leading into a grand lake. It was an absolutely exquisite scene! I was routed to the spot! The pure morning sunshine was reflecting upon its surface and it shimmied and sparked beneath its light. The air was so clear and once again the natural colours (of the tree canopies enveloping the lake) looked vibrant in all of their shades of green, and the deep blue sky encapsulated the panorama. It was magical... it looked like Heaven... and I didn’t want to leave!

I had to depart though, because of the situation with my tent, but I logged the picture in my memory department (like a freeze framed photo) so that I could access it any time I desired. It was beautiful. Top drawer. Lovely.

I found my way back to my camp and began to implement my morning routine, but with a bit of a difference this time... because this time I discovered that I was just about to be caught out by one of “nature’s calls” and I suddenly (and desperately!) needed a “Number 2”...

Ok... we were always going to have to discuss this at some point and in case you’re not from the Island of Great Britain, and are not completely familiar with certain phrases emanating from the shores of Blighty, you may now be wondering what a “Number 2” is?

Well, basically, a number 1 is... pretty easy to do anywhere (especially if you’re a bloke). And a number two is... a little bit trickier! Are you getting my drift yet? Well, let me be a bit more direct (but not a lot!), it has something to do with “dollops” and “drawers”... and the avoidance doing a “dollop”... in your “drawers”!

Do you understand now? Wasn’t too difficult was it!? Not unless you needed a “Number 2”, like me, and there wasn’t a cubical with a flushing chain in sight!

... Usually, when walking in England, you come across (and have the opportunity to use) a “civilised” toilet at least once a day. Be that a public one in a village, or in a country park, or even in a pub. You tend to try and “hold out” for those moments and sometimes you even plan ahead for them!!! But as it turned out, this was the one day (during the whole of my Pilgrimage) where I was most definitely... “caught out”!

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Now, when you’re in the “wild” the general thing to do in this situation is to find a quiet spot, dig a hole and do your business. Then you... “make yourself wholesome again”(!). You then fill in the hole and bury all of your “biodegradable” waste in the process. You try to avoid any place that another human being may accidentally walk through, but anyway, you always leave a place looking exactly as you found it and pretty much undisturbed. That’s the process, and after you’ve done all that you... wash your hands! That’s very important. Crystal? Sorted!

And that’s what I did, well, apart from digging a proper hole because I didn’t get a chance! I quickly found a place that was out of the way, then I speedily made a shallow hole (with my foot and the heel of my shoe) and then I only had a moment before it was “bombs away”! Because the hole was so shallow, I didn’t put the... “cleaning material”... in it, but instead elected to place them in a bag, which I sealed, ready to dispose of when I found a dustbin. It was just a little present for the dustman, you know how it is!!!

After my little adventure, I returned to my tent to wash my hands and then I had my breakfast. It was a time of after eight o’clock and there were a few cars driving by on the road. Some drivers were giving me strange looks, but most passed by without noticing my presence. Then I noticed a pick-up truck drive slowly by and the workman inside observing me with an inquisitive look. The truck then sped off and drove in the direction of a large house in the distance.

“Oh dear,” I thought “I’ve been collared.”

I finished my breakfast, and then began to pack up as it was time to move on, and within about five or ten minutes the truck reappeared again, at a bit of pace, stopping sharply outside the field and by the gate leading into it.

A geezer then got out of the truck and started heading, with purpose, towards me and the field. He was a big burley type, about six foot three inches tall, with a shaven head (that was slightly balding) and had the air of a mechanic or of a groundsman about him. And as he approached the gate to the field, he seemed like he meant business.

On first impressions, he looked like the type of bloke that you really didn’t want to cross or have “fun and games” with, and I had the feeling that if I was about to have “fun and games” with him then the odds were that it was me who was going to come much the worse off. But, having grown up in Barking, odds like that mattered not a jot to me...

“Here we go,” I thought, and then I immediately stood up and took a few “purposeful” strides of my own in his direction, but, however, while saying ever so politely “I’m ever so sorry Sir, I’ll be gone in five minutes.”

He immediately stopped where he was (after just passing through the gate) and I immediately stopped where I was too, and then we began to conduct a conversation at a distance of about fifteen yards apart.

“I came over to ask what you think you’re doing? You can’t camp there, this is a private estate,” he said forcefully, but also very civilly.
“I’m really sorry,” I repeated “I’m doing the Pilgrims Way and I’m on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. I was walking until late last night and I couldn’t find anywhere to stay. I knew that this was an estate, but I thought I’d be alright camping bang on the path because I thought it was a public right of way,” I explained.

“No,” he said, while looking at the path and my tent upon it “That’s not a public right of way, that’s just a path we put in to allow access for the public,” he corrected.

“Oh, I’m so sorry then, but anyway, I’ll be gone in five minutes. I was just packing up,” I continued.

“Ok,” he accepted, and then “You’re West Ham then.”

That very morning I had put my West Ham United football shirt on.

“Yeah... Obviously. Are you?” I replied.

“No chance,” he answered, and then after a pause he said with some menace “Millwall.”

“Oh God... here we go again,” I thought...

(For people who are not familiar with the term “Millwall” it is another football team, in the locality of East London, and happens to be West Ham United’s fiercest football opponents. There is much trouble (and unfortunately much violence) between the two sets of “fans” and there is a history to that aggression. It emanates from the days (over a century ago) when both teams originated from the Island (of Dogs) and the rivalry was formed.

West Ham United FC was originally formed by the men from the Thames Iron Works and Millwall FC by the men from the Millwall Ship and Dock Yards. Millwall was the first of the two football teams to become established and for a time they were one of the strongest teams in the south of England, but after the Thames Iron Works formed their team the “Irons” began to achieve more success and out grew their home. This resulted in a move to Upton Park and the Iron Works changed their name to West Ham United in order to widen their support base. Millwall, in the meantime, moved south of the river and their star rarely shone as bright. However, and it’s a sad thing for me to admit, because of their earlier successes, Millwall still edge the tally of wins in the “head to head” contest between the two clubs)

... “We’ll be seeing you again this season... make’s a change hey?!” I said with my first off the cuff dig (West Ham had just been relegated from the Premiership and joined Millwall in the Championship).

“Yeah, I know... you’ve been trying to avoid us,” he came straight back with!

“Top drawer, good come back!” I thought, and then we proceeded to have a few minutes of banter. He was actually a decent bloke and I enjoyed the couple of minutes we spent in dialogue. The fellow then informed me that he had to return to his work and the conversation actually ended up with us both wishing each other’s team good luck for the season ahead!!!!
Could you “adam and eve” that? I couldn’t believe it! And so I shall just repeat that one more time (because I’m still finding it difficult!). The conversation ended with me... ahem... wishing Millwall, good luck for the season ahead... and he wishing West Ham, good luck for the season to come!!! And in all the history of planet Earth, I’ll wager that has never happened!!!

It’s amazing what a pilgrimage can do!!

The truck pulled away and I began to pack up my tent, and just as I predicted, and within five minutes, I was off trekking down the tree lined avenue which went through the middle of the Eastwell Estate. After a few hundred yards the path then leaves the roadway and enters a large and fairly narrow field. As I walked along I couldn’t help but to notice how lush and weed free the grass was. This was definitely not a paddock I was walking through – it was more like a garden lawn on a grand scale!!!

“There must be a lot of hard work going into the care and maintenance here” I thought and literally, just as that thought drifted through my mind, the reason for the unnaturally perfect look crossed directly into my path, or rather, crossed directly over the path I had just trodden. It was a tractor, with a chemical tank full of herbicides attached... and they were about to spray the field I was in! I was suddenly in a mad rush to get out!

Of all the things I dislike the most about the world we now live in... it was this! The sickening, and consistent spraying of toxic chemicals into our environment and onto the land, just for the sake of a “nice lawn” or “weed free” garden or for crops that require less “human attention”. It’s senseless, it’s lazy and it’s abhorrent to me! Why not do things by hand if you care about them? Instead of inflicting more harm on the planet. It’s moronic to me. Where do people think all those poisonous chemicals go? They don’t disappear into thin air... they get absorbed into the land, enter the ground water supply and then we can end up drinking them!!!

“Why do people do this?” I thought as I upped my pace to evacuate the area. It happened to be a very long field I was walking through, and I was lucky enough in the fact that the man driving the tractor was taking his time to rig the whole thing up, but after a few minutes I saw him get back into the driving seat and the tractor began to head down the field towards me. I upped my gear once again, and entered into that of a trot, luckily enough reaching the style and exiting the field with plenty of time to spare.

“Phew,” I thought “I hate that stuff!”

I carried on walking, but couldn’t help thinking about the nonsense of what was happening behind me. It really annoyed me that all people seem to be talking about these days was their “carbon footprint” and “climate change”, yet no one seemed to be talking about pollution anymore or the amount of toxins and poisons that are being released into the environment and so destroying our habitat. I wondered if the estate would put a sign up to warn other walkers of the chemical hazard on the
grass. It may have looked “perfect”, but I certainly wouldn’t have wanted to take a picnic on it!

As I departed the estate, I had become very low on water again and needed to refill my bottles. I came out onto a main road and was hoping that I may find somewhere to refill them in the hamlet I had encountered. Across the main road were a village green and a cricket field, and (right in the middle of the green) was a man mowing the cricket pitch. I looked further across and saw that there was a “pavilion” club house there too. I thought my luck was most definitely in, and so I walked across to the gentleman (mowing the grass) in order to ask if I may use the club house to refresh my water supply.

The man didn’t notice me as I approached (because of the noise of the mower and because he was concentrating on the work he was doing) and so I waited until he turned the mower around before I “jumped” into his line of sight. When he saw me, he stopped the “two-stroke” engine and acknowledged me.

I explained my predicament and asked if it was possible to gain some water from the club house and the gentleman was more than accommodating. He took me over to the Boughton and Eastwell Cricket Club building and opened it up for me saying that I could also help myself to tea and biscuits if I wanted. I offered my appreciation, but declined the invitation to tea as it was so extremely hot again and all I really wanted was some water.

“I cant believe I just turned down a cup of tea!” I thought to myself.

The gentleman said I could please myself and then he left me in the club house to return to his mowing. I thought he was so kind, and it really struck me how much trust he was giving me to just leave me in the pavilion to sort myself out.

“It’s nice that someone can trust you like that,” I thought.

I got myself back to full water capacity and headed out across the green, to thank the man once again, before venturing back to the Pilgrims Way. He acknowledged my gratitude with a hand wave, while continuing the completion of his task.

“That was nice,” I thought.

The next section of the path follows a beautiful country lane, for some distance, before you cut across country and eventually pass through a field, with a delightful oak tree, and by the wonderful sight of St. Peter and St. Paul’s Church, in Boughton. It continues through some picturesque countryside, and then through some woodland, before finally coming out on a long lane leading to the beautiful town of Chilham.

It was on this lane that I made the mistake of taking serious liberties with my “unmentionables” again, which throughout most of the day (thus far) had been of a solid “C” list celebrity status. However, after taking a late lunch break (by the side of the woods before the long lane began), I opened out my pace (because I was
feeling cocky and I was a muppet!) and paid the inevitable price. The continued “heat-wave” weather, and the tarmac underfoot, meant that by the time I reached near the end of the lane (and just past the lake in the grounds of Chilham Castle) my “plates of meat” were back in the realms of the “A” lister once more and I was finally learning my lesson that on this journey, speed was definitely not of the essence!

I stopped to give myself another rest, and take in the charming views of the castle (which in all fairness seemed to look more like that of a manor house!), and then I realised that I’d lost my sun glasses!!!

“Bugger, bugger, bugger!!!” I thought, and then “Bloody hell!!!”

I remembered back to when I last had them, and recalled that it was when I’d stopped for lunch in the woods. That was a hell of a way back now, but because the sun was so bright (and the fact that I liked the glasses too) I was really torn at what I should do next. Should I take the tune of “fuck it” and walk all the way back to retrieve them or should I take the tune of “fuck em” and continue walking on to Chilham!!!

I absolutely could not make up my mind! To begin with I thought “fuck it” and started to walk back, for about fifty yards, and then my feet (bugger!) were hurting so much that I thought “fuck em” and turned back around! And then after only a few yards I thought “fuck it” once again, walking another couple hundred yards in the direction of the woods, before returning to the conclusion of “fuck em” and turning back once more!!!

I went through about six rounds of this “fuck it” and “fuck em” malarkey, before I realised that in the process I was actually getting closer and closer to the woods anyway!!! It was a nightmare, I absolutely couldn’t decide what to do and I was having some kind of “indecision” mental breakdown!!! I tell you what, I was absolutely behaving like a mental case and I couldn’t help myself!!! I resolved to “just go and get the bloody things” and by the time I was more than half way there, my ... feet... were playing up so much, I just couldn’t face it, and I finally turned back toward Chilham once and for all!!!

“What a donut,” I thought to myself, and I realised that if I hadn’t “fucked about” so much I would’ve probably been to the woods and back by now anyway!!! I wasn’t just a pilchard in that moment... I was a whole tin of them!!! And now my feet were going mental too!!! I’ll just finish this by saying... it wasn’t one of my finest moments!

What a nob-end!!!

By the time I made it up into Chilham I was absolutely “cream crackered” and really needed a rest. I walked up a small incline, to the centre of the village, and beheld the marvellous sight of Chilham market square. It was exquisite and exceptional, and the medieval charm it still attained really lit up my spirit once more, so much so that I temporarily forgot about being knackered! I lingered for a short
while and considered having a beer in one of the adjoining pubs, but (to be fair) I was even too tired for that.

I continued walking through Chilham and followed the North Downs Way through to the grounds of a beautiful church, eventually finding a bench in the shade (underneath a willow tree I think) and laid down on it. To all intents and purposes, it must have appeared that I was now imitating a homeless person! But I didn’t care.

It was so lovely lying there and, after I took my backpack and my shoes off, I felt so at peace. There was a warm breeze blowing over me and not many people passed by. I placed my book underneath my head and dozed off for an hour or so.

It was bliss.

After this extended period of rest I reluctantly raised myself from my slumber and forced myself to move on as the late afternoon had turned into early evening. I headed out towards Old Wives Lees, and on towards Chartham Hatch, and I hoped that I would find a shop in one of the two villages. They both looked big enough to accommodate one and I’d seen on my map that there was a pub in Chartham Hatch (which I thought would be ideal to stop at before I found a wild camp for the night). I realised that I was getting very close to Canterbury, but I didn’t want to reach there that evening. I felt it would be better to arrive in the morning of the next day.

Old Wives Lees held no luck for me (in the village shop department) and I was hoping that I would have more good fortune in Chartham Hatch. I asked a lady (whom I passed en route through the village) and she said that she thought that there was indeed a shop in Chartham Hatch, and that I should be ok to get some supplies. With that reassurance, I pressed on, with my “unmentionables” safely in the “B” list category of celebrity status once again.

After Old Wives Lees, the North Downs Way takes a direction right through the middle of some of Kent’s largest orchards and I had an interesting experience as I travelled through. There’s a point where you walk by the “static caravan” accommodation of all the seasonal workers and it’s as if it’s a small village in itself... or even a holiday camp! But the thing was, as I passed the habitable areas, there was no sense of fun or contentment in the air.

I noticed people sitting outside some of the caravans and as I walked by I gave my usual friendly acknowledgement, but all I received back were blank stares and even looks with a touch of hostility. It wasn’t nice, and it was clear to me that these people were not happy. It was also clear that they were not English, as I heard foreign dialogue too as I passed.

I didn’t know whether to feel sorry for these people or to feel offended by their ignorance towards me, and so I chose to feel neither and just accepted that that’s just how they were. “Maybe it was a cultural thing” I thought. Either way, it again led me to feel a degree of sadness. Years ago, I knew that these orchards would’ve been filled with local English people working hard, and having a laugh while they were doing so, and I realised that there was another part of my country that had been lost too.
“But why are English people not doing these jobs anymore?” I thought. It was a big question, and one that (I assumed) had many answers.

I found my way out of the orchards fields and headed toward Chartham Hatch. I found the North Downs Way to be poorly marked along this little section and so I had to navigate my own way to the centre of the village from there. I found the lane, leading by the pub I had earmarked, but carried on walking past the pub in order to find a shop first.

The lane led into a residential area and I followed the North Downs Way signs directing through an alley way and out into another street, but there was no sign of a shop or any people around. It was deserted. I really needed to find someone to ask, and so, because the previous road I was on seemed busier, I retraced my steps back through the alley way and just as I reached the road I happened to spot a ten or eleven year old kid riding along on his bicycle.

But this kid wasn’t just any kind of kid though, oh no, this kid was special (and I don’t mean with his needs!) because this kid was wearing... a West Ham United football shirt!!! Come on!!!

“Little man, little man!” I called out as I flagged him down “Irons!” I then declared.

He stopped, but didn’t reply, and instead just gave me a very peculiar look.

“Whoops,” I thought, as I realised that I’d probably just been a little bit too over familiar!

“Look, West Ham,” I then said, pointing to the obvious on my shirt, but I still only receiving a blank expression in response!

It was very clear that, out of the two of us, I was the only one getting excited about our unexpected West Ham connection and he didn’t seem to be at all impressed. Didn’t he realise how amazing it was?

“This kid really needs to grow up!!!” I thought.

“Do you speak English?” I asked, a little bit sarcastically, after feeling a little bit hurt by his indifference!

“Yeah,” he replied.

“Oh, top drawer,” I said “Well, I just wondered if you could let me know if there’s a shop in this village?”

“Dunno,” he answered.

“Oh,” I said, a little bit confused, “Don’t you live here then?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“So, how come you don’t know if there’s a shop here or not then?” I asked, even more confused.

“Dunno,” he repeated!!!

This was going nowhere fast, and to be honest, I wondered what was going on!

“Well, where do you get your sweets from then? I knew loads of shops to get my chocolate from when I was your age,” I explained, trying to be funny.

“Oh, there might be one,” he suddenly remembered.
And this confused me even more! How can you come up with an answer of "Oh, there might be one," when you live in a village with only two or three streets in it!

"Well, where might there be one then?" I asked, not giving up all hope!

"If you go through there, and then follow that road up there's a building and sometimes something's open in it. My mum goes there sometimes," he tried to explain.

I really didn’t know what to make of that comment (and I didn’t want to go on a wild goose chase) and so I tried to confirm that there definitely was something worth looking for.

"So, if I go back through the alley and turn left, at the end of that road they'll be a shop?" I repeated, very questionably.

"I think so. I don’t know if it’ll be open though. I can take you there if you want?" he said honestly, and appearing to be as helpful as he could. He actually seemed like a really nice lad.

"Ok, thanks matey, I'll give it a go then," I finally finished.

With that, he turned his bike into the alley way and rode it slightly in front of me. As I followed him, I persevered with my chit chat about West Ham, but it was all to no avail. The lad then turned left at the end of the alley way and after another short distance he pointed to where he "thought" a shop might be. After that, he then turned his bike around and cycled back the way we had come. I shouted out “Thanks,” before I headed off (to follow his directions) in the hope of there being a “shop” at the end of the rainbow.

I reached the junction (at the end of Bigbury Rd - which was also signed as the Pilgrims Way) and looked around, but only discovered a Village Hall. There was nothing that appeared to resemble a shop anywhere and so I looked at the village notice board to see if there was any information that may have been of help. I soon saw why the kid was so confused about the possibility of a shop being in Chartham Hatch though, because the signage did exactly the same to me!!!

It appeared that there was something that was open, a couple of times a week and for a brief period of time, but it didn’t appear to be a shop as such. It appeared to just be some kind of vegetable stall, I guessed, but I have to say that even after reading the sign I was still none the wiser myself!!! What I did know though, was that I wouldn’t be able to purchase any milk or supplies and I made my belated apologies to the kid (... who wasn’t there!) for thinking he was a muppet!

"Enough was enough for one day," I thought, and I decided to walk back to the pub for a cheeky beer. En route, I wondered if I’d be able to buy some milk in the pub anyway and so I wasn’t too disillusioned.

The Chapter Arms had a very welcoming look to it from its exterior. There was a nice (and flowery) trestle garden area outside and a quintessential British phone box sited near to the pubs entrance. It gave the impression of a pub which focused on the restaurant trade and, as I walked in, there were a few groups having meals. I
wandered up to the bar and was greeted by the landlord.

“Ah, West Ham! What can I get you?” he asked while initiating conversation (and with a tone that said banter was imminent).

“Err, what ales have you got... anything local?” I replied, and then proceeded to look around the bar.

Although the pub was kitted out in the usual tradition decor, I noticed a number of items of sporting memorabilia placed at strategic positions around the bar. It was clear, from the various items displayed, that the proprietor was a keen sportsman (or sports fan) and that he was also a... Tottenham Hotspur FC supporter!

“Are you Tottenham then?” I asked to confirm.

“Yes... but unlike many, I don’t mind West Ham, so you’re ok in my book,” he declared, getting the banter going by giving a kindly dig.

“Well I’m glad to hear it... seeing as you’ve got our manager and keep “half-inching” our best players! I’m glad you appreciate us!!!” I said with a bit of a come back.

“Yes well, they deserved to be at a bigger club didn’t they!” he replied, justifying the player pinching, with a shot hitting me just below the belt!

To be honest, at this point I was already running out of ammunition to throw back at him (in the football banter stakes) owing to the fact of West Ham’s dire predicament by just being relegated to the Championship... and Tottenham’s rise and rise to the quarter-finals of the European Cup! At least he hadn’t referred to Spurs as being “mighty” though, that was certainly a relief!

“Well, you can keep Defoe... if he was free he would cost too much!” I offered.

“Oh no! You can have him back!” the landlord said and we both laughed out loud.

As he poured my pint of ale, we did our introductions and it turned out that David was indeed a keen sportsman and he had many stories of liaising with the great and the good from a number of them. He was a very interesting man, with a history that appeared to be well lived, and he struck me as someone who was serious, but who didn’t take himself too seriously! We continued to exchange a number of stories and he informed me that he once played rugby for Harlequins (“Way back in the day!”). I was very impressed and went onto inform him that Harlequins was actually my favourite team (when I was younger) because Jason Leonard used to play for them, and he was from Barking - where I grew up.

I then told him that I trained with Barking RFC (a number of seasons ago) and actually managed to play a couple of games for the “second team”...

“I loved it, but in one game I was put in to cover at fall-back and I hadn’t a clue where to position myself! I felt like I had a remote control stuck up my arse for most of the match because I had to listen to everyone on the sidelines directing me where to go! I scored a try though, so it wasn’t too bad!” I explained.

“Where do you normally play... on the wing?” David deduced.

“Yeah, of course. It’s easy there, just get the ball and run, or hammer in a tackle.” I confirmed.
“Thought so... you don’t look too big, but you do look fast,” he said. 
(“Blimey, you wouldn’t have said that if you saw me trying to keep up with a 75 year old the other day!!” I thought) 

“So what were you... a fat boy front row then?!!” I said cheekily and laughed! 
David laughed too, because it was clear that he wasn’t. He was more of a back row forward... in the amateur days of rugby of course! I went on to say that Jason Leonard still popped his head in at Barking Rugby Club sometimes and that a number of his rugby shirts adorn the walls of the club bar. Immediately, after hearing that, David invited me into the other bar of the pub to show me a signed Tottenham Shirt he had, displayed on a wall, and under protective glass. 

“There you go... the Mighty Spurs!” he declared, as we stood by it. 

“Gor blimey, is there a Tottenham supporter alive that can go for an hour of their life without saying that phrase?! You can stick your white flag up your arse mate!” I proclaimed!!! 
David laughed once more and I went on to admit that I actually didn’t mind Tottenham too much either because of their tradition of playing good football, which was much like the tradition of my own West Ham. We fell into mutual respect mode and David went on to show me other items of interest he had, like cricketing pictures at Lords and some miscellaneous sporting items. 

We returned to the main bar and I noticed that it seemed a bit quiet for a Thursday evening. David informed me that it had been a tough year for business all round. I sympathised that it must be a pretty demanding job to run a public house these days and David agreed. He went further by saying that with all the regulations and red tape, that he also had to deal with, he was considering giving it up all together. He testified that “As much as he enjoyed the job itself... it was starting to feel like it wasn’t worth the hassle.” 

That statement made me then come out with something that had been on my mind for years, as I (like many in the British Isles) have observed, with aghast, the seemingly terminal decline of the licensed public house. It’s something that concerns me greatly and I put forward my hypothesis for the Governments continued apathy (and blatant encouragement!) towards that terminal decline. And so I told David: 

“I honestly believe that the Government has an agenda to destroy the humble British pub, and you shall not sway me from that opinion,” I said. 

“Why’s that?” David asked, with a hint of disbelief. 

“Because they appear to do everything they can to introduce more and more red tape, licensing laws and taxes to make pubs more and more difficult to run and so less profitable... and they never seem to make life easier for you. They never make it more practical, less bureaucratic or reduce the amount of licences you require. And not for just selling alcohol, either, but all the bureaucracy you have to abide by for just having music playing on the radio say... let alone allowing the freedom for people to play music live!!!” I declared. 

“I’m not sure about that,” David said honestly, and not sounding at all convinced.
“Well, common sense dictates that if you want something to survive then you support it, and if you want to eradicate it then you make life difficult for it,” I said, as David began to look a touch more convinced, and I continued “And from the evidence I see, it seems to me that pubs are being attacked (via more and more “unreasonable” legislation) by the Government (and by local authorities) and are not being supported by them in any way, and so that leads me to believe that my statement is true, and there is an agenda to close them down.”

“I see what you mean,” David said, one-quarter convinced.

“It’s what I see anyway, and what I also see is that the reason for this potentially being the case is because the pub is the one place where everyone (no matter what their background or social standing) can meet, to interact and converse with each other, and I don’t think the Government wants that. What I think the Government wants is to actually reduce the amount of opportunities people have to think and to speak with each other, and for everyone to be leading separated and divided lives. I think they just want people to be working their nuts off all day long and returning home to their individual boxes at night, completely knackered, so that all they feel like doing is “vegging” out in front of the television, until they finally go to bed and get ready to start the whole process again the next morning,” I said, while entering into lecture mode!

“I take your point,” David said, now seemingly half convinced, but still not completely!

“I think pubs are amazing places, David, I really do,” I then announced.

“Now that’s something I can agree with! Although, I’m not sure how much longer my one’s going to last!” he said with a self-deprecating laugh.

“Do you know how pubs started in the first place mate?” I asked.

“No, but I’m sure you’re about to tell me,” David stated, quite comically, while raising his eyebrows, and rolling his eyes, and using a humorous tone to intimate his indifference and boredom at my continued lecture!

I cracked up, and really started laughing at his antics. He was a genuinely jolly and funny man.

“Well, if you’re going to be like that, I won’t bother telling you then,” I declared while still laughing to myself.

“Oh go on, tell me... come on,” he said, belying his real interest with a smile!

“Alright, basically, during the times of the middles ages (when there wasn’t a clean and reliable water supply for most people) ale was the main source of liquid refreshment, for most folk, because the process of brewing the beer cleansed the water and made it fit for consumption. Sometimes a household may produce more than they required (for their own use) and when that occurred they put a sign outside of their home (like the swinging signs that still exist outside pubs today) to show that their house was open to the public and that beer was available to be purchased. So, in effect, during those moments their house was a “Public House”.

Now, as with everything, there’s always going to be some people who are better
at producing something than the rest, and obviously some of those folk became very
good and efficient at producing their brew, and over a period of time began to
specialise in that area in order to earn their living. It’s called commerce I think!!!
And the people that did take this route eventually turned their homes into
permanent “Public Houses” and that is where we get the term and the institution
from. It is also why a traditional English Pub has a cosy feel to it and why their
design generally resemble that of someone’s living room,” I explained.

“I see,” David said, with genuine intrigue.

At that point a younger man turned up to serve behind the bar and David
explained that it had been a pleasure to meet me, but he was going to retire to his
quarters upstairs. I expressed the same sentiment, and then took the opportunity to
ask if I may purchase a pint of milk off of him. David considered, but then explained
that he didn’t have any bottles because he bought his milk in industrial size
containers, but if I had a bottle of my own I could have some. All I had was my litre
bottle in hand, and so David took it from me and instructed the newly arrived
barman to fill it up.

“How much will that be?” I enquired.

“Oh don’t worry about that, it’s only milk, I’ve got gallons of the stuff,” he kindly
replied and then finally excused himself.

“That was nice,” I thought.

The young man came back from filling my litre bottle with milk (and with just under
two pints in it) and I proceeded to order another pint of ale, while then asking for a
water top up too and getting my book out ready to read. The barman was very
helpful and didn’t mind taking the time to do all the tasks as the bar wasn’t
particularly busy. I accepted the return of my water bottles, with the addition of a
pint of beer, and then buried my head into my book while feeling at home and
extremely comfortable in my temporary surroundings.

The barman continued to attempt to make himself look busy, but once all of his
initial chores appeared to be completed, he began to engage me in conversation by
asking about my book.

“What’s that you’re reading then?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s called “The Sun and The Serpent” and it’s about these guys* who traced
the St. Michael Ley Line across southern England during the late eighties. It’s a great
book,” I informed him.

He showed further interest, and so I showed him the book, initially by finding the
map of the charted line from it’s beginning at England’s most westerly point (near
Lands End) to England’s most easterly point (in Norfolk). He seemed intrigued and
took a closer look at the points it crossed on the map. As he did so I continued to
explain...

*Paul Broadhurst and Hamish Miller were the authors of “The Sun and The Serpent”.
“It actually runs directly through a number of spiritually significant sites; including St. Michael’s Mount, the Cheese Rings (in Cornwall), Glastonbury Tor and Avebury Stone Circle... and they all align with the Beltane sunrise on May Day,” I said.

The barman studied the map (and some of the other points on it that I hadn’t mentioned) and then suddenly recognised a place that he was familiar with.

“Burrow Mump!? I used to go there when I was younger, it was close to where I lived,” he said.

“Are you not from Kent then?” I enquired.

“No, I’m from Somerset originally and I used to go up to the Mump with my girlfriend sometimes,” he explained.

“Do you know what, I’ve always been meaning to go there, but I haven’t got around to it yet. Does it feel a bit special there? Did you feel anything different from normal?” I asked.

“Well, to be honest, I’m not really into that kind of thing,” and then he hesitated “But yeah, there was something about it actually, I don’t know what exactly, but it was pretty peaceful... that’s why me and my girlfriend used to go up there,” he explained further

“Yeah, but there are a lot of places that feel peaceful... what I mean is, was there something that made it feel different to other places in any way?” I expressed the question in a more direct and specific way.

“Err, well, like I say, I’m not really into that type of thing and I haven’t really thought about it before, but yeah, I can only say that it does,” he answered as honestly as he could.

I found it really interesting to hear that, especially from someone who hadn’t considered it before, and I confirmed that I really wanted to visit the place for myself. He advised me that I should definitely go and I went on to tell him more about what I’d read in the book while showing him parts of it.

“The writers of the book were dowsing the St. Michael line, in order to trace it, to find out where it went and while doing so they discovered another energy current which followed a similar path and interacted with the St. Michael line as it did so.

What they also discovered was the St. Mary line and they found that the two energy currents represented the masculine and feminine of the Earths natural energy field, and whenever the “St. Mary” ley line crossed the “St. Michael” current it created what they called “node” points. They also found that both currents passed directly through a number of Christian churches (and monuments) dedicated to the Saints with the corresponding names!”

The barman was listening to me avidly, while he flicked through my book, and then I took hold of the book once more in order to show him a picture of another discovery the men made.

“Here, look at this,” I said, with enthusiasm, after finding the page with the diagram of Glastonbury Tor on it and placing it in front of him “When they dowsed the lines, on the Tor at Glastonbury, this is what they found... look at how the two
currents interact with each other. They almost form a labyrinth, and it culminates in the St. Michael line forming what looks like a phallus or a penis, entering the St. Mary line, as it forms what could be described as a womb or vagina. They appear to “marry” and the interaction happens at what is the very top of Glastonbury Tor!"

“That’s amazing,” the barman said.

“I know... beautiful hey,” I replied.

A couple then came to the bar and the barman went to serve them. It naturally brought an end to our conversation, and so I decided to engross myself in my book once more. I took my pint and found a table to sit at. I was actually at a point in the book which preceded the Glastonbury Tor revelation, but because I’d been flicking through it (to look at the pictures) beforehand, I’d already seen some of the information yet to come. But the part of the book that I was just about to read took my intrigue to a new level as the information appeared to directly associate itself with my pilgrimage, and more specifically, to that of the ruins of Barking Abbey...

(Before that though, I think I need to explain why I was reading the book I had in my possession at this time. Basically, it was very simple. I only ever pick up a book to start reading if I feel like it’s the right time to do so (I don’t think I’m alone in that either) and the day before I departed on my Pilgrimage, I felt like this was the right time to read it. I’d bought the book three years before (in 2008) and had never felt the inclination to pick it up again, and in all those years it had just remained sitting on a book shelf.

To be even more honest, I’m not even sure why I originally bought it. I just happened to be passing a book shop in Glastonbury and saw it in the window. I looked at it, and then thought “Maybe I should buy that,” before entering the shop to ask the bookseller about it. The lady bookseller informed me that “It’s very good,” and so, without further enquiry, I just went with the flow and purchased it. I didn’t look at it again until a time when I sat by the side of a river and was “viciously” splashed by a number of unruly dogs!!!)

... I was on page 126 of the book and it began to speak about the European St. Michael Line, which crossed Europe all the way from Rhodes, before passing through Mont St. Michel (in Brittany) while on its way to its “mirror image” across the English Channel at St. Michael’s Mount (in Cornwall). At this point the European St. Michael Line crossed the English St. Michael Line and the books authors stated that it formed a significant node point there. They then went on to say that:

“It is tempting to consider that the Normans understood this, and that when William the Conqueror invaded England on St. Michael’s Eve*, 1066, and gave Cornwall to his half-brother Robert de Mortain (who rode into the county flying a banner of St. Michael), they were guided by more than the material considerations of conquest.

*St. Michael’s Day is on 29th September, and so its Eve was on the 28th.
The tangible link between St. Michael’s Mount and Mont St. Michel that resulted from this, and the establishment of a Benedictine monastery, was to last for centuries."

“Benedictine? William the Conqueror? Earth energy?... Barking Abbey?!” I thought. Forget about words... I was lost for thoughts, and I took a few moments to collect mine! You may remember that before I departed on my pilgrimage I spoke with Canon Gordon Tarry about the nature of pilgrimages and the history of Barking Abbey. One of the questions I asked him, at the time, was about the positioning of the abbey itself. I explained that (from my travels around the world) I’d found that many Christian churches had been built on the existing “Spiritual” sites of the indigenous peoples who were colonised, and I enquired if he knew of anything in the churches record that may have acknowledged the same at Barking Abbey.

I basically wondered if there was any evidence of maybe some kind of Druid place of worship occupying the site at Barking, and preceding the construction of the abbey in 666 AD. I was told that there was no evidence, of which he was aware, and that as far as he knew the abbey had been constructed upon its site in Barking for purely strategic reasons, owing to its proximity to the River Roding and consequently its accessibility to the River Thames. I accepted Canon Gordon Tarry’s answer, but my intuition had always told me that there was a different kind of feel to the energy in and around the site of Barking Abbey, and so, based purely on that (and nothing else!) I kept my mind (and heart!) open to the possibility.

Well, during that moment, sitting there in the pub and reading that passage from my book, something appeared to “click” in me, and I began to wonder again if I could be right about my initial presumption. After all, was there any significance in Barking Abbey being the first “Benedictine” Abbey to be built in England? And why did William the Conqueror choose it as his first residence after he had been successful in his quest to conquer England? Maybe it was just for strategic reasons, after all, because Barking Abbey was close to the City of London, but surely there were other places better situated? Was the connection because of the Benedict’s? But what was significant about the Benedict’s anyway?

I didn’t know, but I found it to be very intriguing. It also made me realise that I still knew very little about what “benedictine” actually meant. I only knew that it was a teaching of Christianity, established by St. Benedict, and I have to admit that I’ve always been so very confused about all the different orders of Christianity. As a result, I’ve never really bothered to investigate them further because it all seemed like such a mess (the difference’s between Protestant’s and Catholic’s was enough to confuse me!!!).

From the gist of what I gathered (without any in-depth enquiry) it appeared to me that all versions of Christianity were saying Jesus Christ was the truth, and the only way to the truth, yet they all appeared to differ slightly in their interpretation of that truth and in the name they gave to their “faith”. To be fair, I’ve never known what to make of it all and so I just didn’t bother finding out. A church has always
been a church to me and even at Christmas, when I’ve attended Midnight Mass, I’ve just gone to whichever church was closest to me at the time (and whether that was in my own country or abroad).

Anyway, even though I didn’t have all the answers, I was quite amazed by the revelations and it gave me much food for thought. I carried on reading and soon come across another reference to the Benedictines. It was on page 137 and was in reference to two churches, under the Benedictine Prior of Tywardreath, in Cornwall. It stated:

“Traditionally, the Benedictines had been initiates in the mysteries of the Earth’s energies, and like the Knights Templar who were charged with the protection of the Pilgrim routes that were the physical counterpart of the terrestrial channels, always seemed to crop up in exactly the right place”

“What the bloody hell?” I thought “Hang on! Is that the answer to my question?!?”

I was spell bound and I continued to think that if William the Conqueror was aware of the nature of the Earth’s energy fields (as he set upon his conquest of England), wouldn’t he be “particular” about the first place he set up residence in England after his success? And if he was “particular” about the place in which he first resided, wouldn’t he select a place that beheld a “particular” significance to the Earths energy field? And if he had selected that first residence based upon its significance... then could that mean that the site of Barking Abbey was indeed significant in a way other than that of being “strategic”?

Of course, I couldn’t answer any of that, and I’m not completely convinced myself. I’m simply informing you of the direction of my thoughts in that moment. I didn’t know all the answer’s... I just had lots of questions!!! And it appeared that the few answers that I had received... led me to even more questions!!! My head was now buzzing with “consideration” and I didn’t feel like I could read anymore. I finished my beer and I returned my glass to the bar. I then bided my farewell to the barman.

“Good to meet you mate,” he said, as he approached me from the other side of the bar and in order to shake my hand.

“You too bud,” I replied, while shaking his.

“And make sure you get to the Mump!” he then added.

“Will do,” I said, with a smile, and then I loaded my backpack upon my “coal sack” and departed the Chapter Arms Inn.

* I have since discovered that there is indeed significance to the location of Barking Abbey. Very intriguingly, I have found that there is a straight line which is formed by the sites of Barking Abbey (Benedictine), the Tower of London, Southwark Cathedral and Westminster Abbey (Benedictine). It is called the London Stonehenge Line because the alignment leads from London to... Stonehenge.
I retraced my steps back into the village (of Chartham Hatch) and then out into the countryside once more. I was immediately in “Camp Site Search Mode” and knew that I was now very close to Canterbury. It was a peculiar sensation I was experiencing at this time (and not just because of all the revelations!). I found that I was in no rush to get to Canterbury at all and that I actually didn’t want to get there any time soon.

Now, to people who have never partaken in a long distance walk before, that comment may appear to be neither here nor there. But to all those walkers (who may very well be life long members of the “Serious Hiking Association”) that comment will be very telling. You see, when you approach an undertaking of the like I was on, you begin the long distance walk without any urgency whatsoever, but after you cross the half way point in your journey, an urgency begins to slowly develop in you as you see your goal (and the finish line) becoming closer and closer. This urgency then builds into a slight crescendo as the fulfilment of your ambition is seen to be within your reach. Your pace increases as your excitement intensifies. In short, the closer you get to the end of your journey, the faster you want to walk because you just can’t wait to experience the feeling of joy as you complete your challenge and feel the grand sense of accomplishment when doing so. And so, during the last stages of a really long hike, you’re generally buzzing towards the end and can’t wait to finish (for all the right reasons!).

On this day I was feeling completely different though, and so removed from anything I had ever experienced before. I simply didn’t want my pilgrimage to finish and I didn’t want it to come to the end. I just wanted to go as slow as I could and appreciate every last moment of the journey I was on. I wondered if the issues I’d had with my “unmentionables” (through the whole of the journey) were not just to challenge or test me, but were also to teach me to slow down. It became apparent to me that, as a consequence of the problems I’d had, I’d spent most of my journey plodding along out of sheer necessity and because of the pain. The extreme heat had played its part too and even the extreme rain slowed me down some more! It had all resulted with the increasing of the length of my experience and the depth of the experience I’d had.

In fact, I’m usually the type of character who “gets stuck in” and “lays into something”, achieving results pretty efficiently and (usually) very effectively. “Bang, bang, bang... Job done!” is one of the expressions I like to use, along with “Why do something tomorrow... when you can do it today?”

Living like that had always made a lot of sense to me because I felt (in some circumstances) it made the most of the moment. But maybe there were other ways in which a moment could be best utilised, and perhaps that was one of the lessons I needed to learn from my pilgrimage.

As I continued to walk, I remembered the wise words an old Cockney once said to me (while we were finishing a gardening job, in East Ham, and I was frantically trying to get the task finished by the end of the working day):
“Slow down, Lee... save some for tomorrow,” Roy told me.

He was one of the old boys who used to work for Newham council (before the local parks contract went out to tender and his contract was forcibly transferred to a private company) and I loved the sentiment. In that moment, and as I traversed the last few miles of my Pilgrimage to Canterbury, it was exactly how I felt. I needed to find an appropriate spot in which to camp pretty soon and in the sentiments of Roy, I felt like I needed to “Save some of my Pilgrimage for tomorrow!”

I carried on and, almost immediately after leaving the outskirts of Chartham, I was in a beautiful woodland and then came to a field (surrounded by the same woods) that appeared to be an old orchard. I wondered if this would play host to my camp for the night, but because of the high tree canopy around it, the whole of the field was already out of direct sun light and I really wanted to find a place where I could see the sun set. Even though I had no idea about the terrain I was going to encounter ahead of me, I thought that it would be great to find a spot on a hill that might be overlooking Canterbury Cathedral itself. How wonderful would that be!

I did realise, however, that I would be very lucky if I did find such a place. I also realised that it was rapidly reaching the point where I would be a beggar, rather than a chooser, in my quest for the perfect spot. But seeing as I had been pretty lucky thus far on my Pilgrimage, I decided that it was worth holding out for a bit longer before I finally settled on my camp site spot.

About half way into the field I came across a sign which explained that I was in “No Man's Orchard”. I read the signage and apparently the name “No Man’s” was given to land that straddled more than one parish and so it was literally “the land of no one man”! The border of the villages of Chartham and Harbledown went straight through the middle of the orchard, and the two parish councils had bought the land in order to protect the “traditional” orchard and turn it into a nature reserve. It was very beautiful there, with all its (encouraged) wild flowers.

I half thought about camping there (again) but decided to press on and left the orchard to re-enter the woods on Bigbury Hill. The North Downs Way path continued through some picturesque (and well managed) woodland and I came across a trio of men working in the woods. An area of woodland had been coppiced (with the timber stacked) and there was a fire on the go too. I thought it must be quite late for them to still be working, but it was a very pleasant sight to witness.

Even though they were using chain saws (and were wearing modern clothes) they were part of a continuum that had been taking place for generations, and it was nice to behold such a “traditional” working scene. I felt pleased that such activities were still being continued and that the woodland was being managed in a time-honoured fashion.

I eventually departed the extremely pleasant woodland path and came out upon a road. Just across the road was a gate leading into another large field, and I jumped
across to investigate the possibility of making camp there. The field had dividing sections of hedge within it, and it looked to me as if it had been used as a car parking area at some point, but the lay of the land was not conducive to a good nights sleep with every region of the field being very “lumpy and bumpy” (under the long grass) throughout. “Bugger,” I thought, and I continued on by leaving the field and rejoining the North Downs Way on the road.

Almost immediately the road became a “fly-over” which crossed the busy A2. As I reached the middle of the road bridge (and so the middle of the A2 dual carriage way beneath me) I stopped to take in the view. The realisation of being so close to the end of my journey was really hitting home and I found the sudden encounter with an overwhelming aspect of modern civilisation difficult to take in, especially because it came so soon after my beautiful walk through the woods at Bigbury Hill – I’d felt so removed from modern civilisation during the moments that I’d just spent there.

My final destination was not far away at all and, just as I completed my crossing of the road bridge, the North Downs Way was signed up again. This time it had a mileage distance incorporated on it and it stated that Canterbury was just 2 miles away. I actually felt disheartened in that moment, as I realised that the distance it indicated was to the centre of the city, which meant I probably only had one mile of countryside left to traverse. Was I going to find a good place to camp before I reached the outskirts? It wasn’t looking good and the section of the path I was now on was very similar to that of the area around South Darenth (and when I was leaving the outskirts of Dartford) with a very unkempt feel to it.

I continued on and warmed myself with the thought of “You never know,” (in regards to the possibility of finding a nice home for the night), but I had the feeling that my dream camp on a hill overlooking the City of Canterbury was in the realms of the greatest kind of wishful thinking. As the path began to go up hill, however, I started to feel hopeful again. Along the left hand side of the path there was another orchard, and I managed to find a gap in the fence so that I could enter and conduct a little recce. I discovered that it was a bit exposed (with houses overlooking from the hill on the far side of the field), but decided that it may do if I was really desperate. I found a spot which was still being bathed by the sun and took off my backpack in order to take a well deserved rest.

I sat there for a while, considering the possibility of setting up camp, but concluded that I wouldn’t be comfortable there and so I resolved to continue in my search. I decided to leave my backpack where it was while I did so, as it was becoming a great effort to keep walking around and searching with it on. It was safe enough where it was, and so (considerably lightened) I found my way out of the orchard and continued up the hill, while exploring every “knock and cranny” of camping opportunity en route… and literally… within five minutes and just as I reached the top of the hill… I hit the jackpot!!!
As I took a small path (to my left once more) I discovered a wide open field, with a park bench in the middle of it, which was open to the public. It held fantastic views over the orchard I was just in and on to the Kentish Hills in the distance. It was facing due west, and so I was standing in the full glare of a beautiful and mysterically setting Sun. It was perfect! Top drawer! Could it have been any better? Not a chance in hell... or Heaven for that matter, because although I previously had a little inkling that it’d be nice to be looking from a hill top and onto Canterbury Cathedral itself, I was glad that I wouldn’t actually be seeing it that night now. I felt like the first sighting I should have of the Cathedral should be on the morning of my arrival, and as it was now looking, that would certainly be the case.

“Thank you God... or Consciousness... whatever you want to call yourself. Thank you. Thanks for all your help,” I said as I stood there, gazing upon the setting Sun.

With an air of excitement I ran back down the hill, jumped through the fence, found and grabbed my backpack, and then returned at pace to the bench at the top of the hill. I then relieved myself of my heavy burden and sat to enjoy the last rays of direct sunlight as they disappeared, for another day, behind the deep green hills of the Kentish landscape.

“See you tomorrow mate,” I thought, as the sun slipped beneath the horizon and a slight chill entered the air.

There was still around another hours worth of daylight remaining, so I didn’t want to set up camp just yet because of it being a public place. There were houses surrounding the park area and I also saw a number of beer cans and cigarette butts around the bench on which I was sitting. It was clear that this was a well used place and I thought that it was probably a place where youngsters may come to hang around or chill out. Instead’ I just did another recce of the area and found a spot to camp that I thought would be comfortable and quite well hidden. Once I had done that, I returned to the bench, got out my burner and began to prepare my dinner.

It was past ten o’clock when I finally felt comfortable enough to pitch my tent and implement the remaining parts of my evening routine, just as the stars were forming in the celestial sky. I noticed that it was remarkably darker on this night, and after I had finished my shower and was dressed in my sleeping wear, I sat in my tent and attempted to locate the moon. The night sky was clear and so the moon couldn’t have been hiding behind an indiscriminate cloud. I couldn’t see it anywhere and so I wondered if it had even risen yet.*

I gave up trying to locate the Moon, as it was just so beautiful looking at the stars anyway, and because there was no apparent moonlight there appeared to be more stars out than usual.

As I sat, relaxing in my tent, enjoying the last moments of the peaceful evening ambience and gazing upon the Universe above me. I thought more about the Moon and I remembered the time, in 1999, when I went to Cornwall to view the eclipse...

*While writing this account, I discovered that there was a new Moon on 1st July.
I was actually at Pentewan Sands (as it was directly under the centre line of totality) and was positioned in a farmers field on the cliffs overlooking Mevagissey Bay. I recalled the very strange and curious experience I had that day (during the minutes of the total eclipse). The sudden drop in temperature; the twilight accompanied by an eerie silence; the farm animals huddling together in the middle of the fields, which occupied the hillsides of the landscape around me; the ship that was anchored out in the bay and the flashes of light emanating from all along the coastline as people took their photos in order to record the special moment. But most of all I recollected the thought that I had as I peered through my protective glasses and caught glimpses of the coming together of the Moon and the Sun through the thick cloud cover;

“What are the odds that the Moon is so perfectly positioned from the Earth, that it covers the Sun so exactly? It’s amazing!” I thought.

To be honest, hours after the event (and when I really considered it) I thought that it was much more than amazing. In fact, I thought it was quite bizarre, but I couldn’t come upon a logical explanation why it should be the case. The odds seemed too long for something like that to have happened by chance and the only conclusion I could come up with was that;

“Whoever created the Universe... created it perfectly!” It wasn’t a great explanation... but it was the best I could do at the time!

I then went onto remembered a time when I finally got some kind of answer with regards to that question. It was exactly nine years later and during the August of 2008. I was feeling very down at the time, and I have to say quite depressed, because I didn’t know what to do as I witnessed all the nonsense that surrounded me in the world. All I wanted to do was walk, such was the apathetic state of my mind, and so for much of that month I just found myself walking around and around Greenwich Park.

Now, if you know Greenwich Park, then you’ll know how big it is and circuit of the park is about three miles long. Some days, during this period, I’d walk around the park six or seven times and on many occasions I’d still be there walking long into the night and long after the park had closed (it was actually very peaceful during those moments).

It obviously wasn’t a great period for me to experience, as I felt very low most of the time, but one day (as I was walking towards the park after exiting the Greenwich foot tunnel) I had an urge to go into Waterstones Bookshop en-route. I wasn’t looking for anything in particular and so I thought I’d just dowse for some information...

(If you’re not familiar with that expression or act, it simply means that I went into a bookshop, walked around randomly and just picked up a book that I felt attracted to and without looking at its title. I then just opened it and started to read the page before me. I’ve found that, throughout my life, it is such an efficient and effective way of gaining the information which is relevant to my path, and it seems to work for me almost every time... and that’s something you can believe or disbelieve, I couldn’t care less, it’s just the truth of my experience)
... and so I walked around Waterstones, went upstairs, walked towards the first floor front window, picked out a “random” book on a “random” shelf and then sat down to read. And the book was;

“Who Built the Moon?” By Christopher Knight and Alan Butler*

It was a fascinating book and I sat there for over an hour flicking through it and reading passages. I really wish I could go further into what I read, but that would be falsifying the account of the thoughts I had in the moment that I sat there observing the stars. The truth is I only had the passing memory of the eclipse experience, then I remembered my experience nine years later and the book. Then I just thought; “Is the Moon real anyway?!!!” before I immediately remembered another event (connected with the Moon) from my childhood...

I was twelve years old and I was out in my (other) Nan’s back garden in Dagenham. It was a very clear night, and there was a full moon, and I had borrowed a pair of my uncles’ binoculars so that I could see the Moon’s surface. I was fascinated by the Moon when I was a kid and this was the first time I’d ever had a chance of seeing its craters up closely. I’d been out there for almost an hour when my Nan suddenly appeared in the garden and spoke with me.

“Don’t look at the Moon for too long Lee... or you’ll go mad,” she said.

I still remembered that moment (to this day) because it was one of the strangest things I’d ever heard at the time. I gave my Nan the weirdest of looks and she went on to explain that one of her cousins used to look at the Moon all the time - and he went mad (well that conclusively proved it then!!!). I wondered if my Nan was just telling one of those silly things that adults sometimes say to kids (just to scare them), but my Nan said it with such seriousness that I really didn’t know what to believe**.

However, from that day to this, I never looked at the Moon for long periods of time again, and as I sat there, looking at the heavens, I thought;

“Maybe it’s a good job I can’t see the Moon tonight after all!”

After that, I took one last look at the beautifully speckled celestial sky, and then I zipped up my tent and snuggled into my bed.

“I wonder if I’ll see Miriam tomorrow,” I thought, before I drifted off to sleep.

* In the days just before I commenced the writing of this book, I came across another piece of information (connected to the Moon, and for whom Graham Hancock was the conduit) that stated the fact that the Moon is 2160 “English” miles in diameter. 2160 is a number linked to the precession cycle of the Earths equinoxes and to the transition of the astrological ages through the epochs of time (each zodiacal age is approximately 2160 years in length). I only mention this because I think that the information is very interesting and because it also begs the question of exactly where did the distance unit of the “English” mile originate from?! This question could well end up with the conclusion that the “English” mile is not in fact “English” after all!

** It is interesting to consider the origins of the words lunatic and lunacy though.
Above Left: View of the Lake at Eastwell
Above Right: The Avenue through the Eastwell Estate

Above Left: Boughton and Eastwell Cricket Club
Above Right: The Pilgrims Way

Above Left: The path by Boughton Church
Above Right: St. Peter and St. Paul’s Church, Boughton
Above Left: Path from Boughton
Above Right: Kent Orchard with The Chapter Arms in the background

Above Left: The Chapter Arms
Above Right: Where I asked for directions at Chartham Hatch

Left:
The Pilgrims Way at Chartham Hatch
Above Left and Right:
The coppiced area in the woods at Bigbury

Above and Below:
The path through Bigbury Woods
Above Left: Path across the A2
Above Right: Crossing the A2

Left:
The path up
Golden Hill

Below Left: Golden Hill
Below Right: Sixth night camp site
Day 7 – Friday 1st July, 2011

When I awoke, it was another beautiful morning and I had the sensation of feeling so very lucky with the weather that I had been gifted throughout my journey... even if it was a touch too hot! It was around eight o’clock and I was pleased to discover that there was still no-one around. I had the summit of the hill to myself and it was lovely sitting there in the morning sunshine, waiting for my water to boil, as I implemented my morning routine. The top of the hill was mainly grassed over and the area around me was backed up by brambles. Just in front of me the hill slopped down, with paths meandering through partial scrub and woodland, and I was happy taking in the view.

After an extended breakfast period, I was on the road by nine, and as I left the confines of the park area I saw a sign by the gate. The area I’d spent the night in was under the care of the National Trust and it was called... Golden Hill!

“What a nice touch,” I thought, as I smiled and continued to follow the North Downs Way into the suburban landscape.

The path immediately enters a residential area, leading to a main road, which then leads down the hill to meet the busy dual carriage way which is the A2. The A2, in turn, leads directly into Canterbury (or directly to London – depending on which way you go!).

As I reached the bottom of the hill, and turned right to look towards the City of Canterbury itself, I got my very first view of Canterbury Cathedral. It was unmissable, and stood proud overlooking the city at what seemed like the end of the road I was now on. I was almost there!

“Not too far now,” I thought to myself, but (again) it was a strange sensation I was experiencing.

Although I felt happy, I did not feel an overwhelming sense of joy, and as I carried on walking towards the centre of Canterbury (with the cathedral in my permanent line of sight), I suddenly had another strange impression and realisation – the top of the cathedral (from the distance I was away) looked ever so much like the Masonic hand gesture for the Devil! And then I recalled that I had just walked from the ruins of Barking Abbey which was built in the year 666 AD* – the number that represented the mark of the beast!!! Arghhhh!!!!

* Since the undertaking of my Pilgrimage, I have wondered (with great intrigue) why St. Erkenwald would construct his Benedictine Abbey in a year marked by a number which supposedly represents negative forces. If that number has such “evil” connotations, why do that? Why not wait a few months, and until the year 667, before starting the foundation of the Abbey? Perhaps it was just convenient timing and there is no relevance to the year of the Abbey’s construction... but say if there is? What if the number 666 represented something other than the “mark of the beast”? What if it was symbolic of something else?

Considering that the Benedictines were initiates into the knowledge of Earth energy, these questions raised themselves to me and so I investigated the possibility of other connections to the number 666. Carbon is essential to life on Earth and I was interested to find that a carbon atom is comprised of 6 protons, 6 neutrons and 6 electrons. Could this fact be significant to the numbers symbolism?
Actually, I then had a little smile to myself because I thought “You know what, the Devil ain’t no match for love mate... and I left with love... and I’m bringing love... and if the Devil’s around these parts today... then he’s going to get some love... because he needs it... much love... all over,” and I smiled to myself some more.

I walked on, a bit further, and as I came to a spot (where I had a good view of Canterbury Cathedral and by a line of trees to my right) I had an overwhelming feeling that I wanted to repeat my affirmation again and I stopped to take off my backpack. I repeated the reason for which I had undertaken my Pilgrimage and then I remembered Brian Haw, by saying a prayer and thanking him (again) for everything he had done. After I’d finished my prayer, I remained standing and continued to focus my attention on the cathedral as I continued in my remembrance.

Cars continued to whizz by the side of me (on the former Roman Road, which was now the A2) as they negotiated their way through the last moments of the morning rush hour. Some cars even appeared to slow as the drivers witnessed a very peculiar man seemingly gazing into oblivion! I didn’t care what I looked like to other people though, I just gave my full attention and appreciation to the moment. I then lifted my backpack once more and resumed on my way.

From that point on, I lost track of the North Downs Way signs and I re-engaged the olde Anglo-Saxon orienteering tactic of just following my nose! I crossed a river and then saw a beautiful park (to the right of me) and decided to enter it after noticing a cycle path sign which directed to the city centre. I followed it to the side of another waterway (and through a small tunnel underneath a roadway) and continued along the street until I came upon the sight of Canterbury Castle.

It was quite an impressive spectacle (Canterbury Castle) and I thought it’d be a nice place to sit and have lunch, later on, if need be. By the side of the ruined castle, lay Castle Street and the road appeared to lead directly towards the Cathedral itself, and so I followed it in.

It was wonderful to be finally walking along the ancient streets of Canterbury. The place still had a very “middle-ages” charm about it and, as I was approaching the cathedral at a time of just before eleven o’clock, the city had a feeling of just getting ready to get into its full stride as the tourists were beginning to turn up.

Castle Street led me directly to the main high street whereby I reached a junction it had with the quaint (and tiny) medieval road called Mercery Lane. It was beautiful reaching that point, in the morning sunshine, because as I looked further down the lane I could see, ever so clearly, the gates of Canterbury Cathedral. I was there!!!

I stopped to appreciate the moment some more and looked around to observe my immediate vicinity. I then noticed something else... the corner of the road (as it joined the High Street) housed a bank whose logo incorporated a black horse!

“How appropriate is that to my pilgrimage?!“ I thought, but that was not all.

Attached to the side of the buildings exterior was another sign which designated the name of the road I had just traversed (and which had led straight on from Castle Street) and its name was – St. Margaret’s Street!

“Nice touch,” I thought “Of all the roads that I could’ve approached from...” and I smiled!

I entered Mercery Lane and followed the old road down to the little square (on Sun Street) and looked in awe upon the ancient Cathedral Gates. What a sight to behold at the end of a pilgrimage! I could only wonder what the sensation might have been like for pilgrims, in times long passed, who encountered the sight after
journeying through nothing but forest and woodland, and who may have never seen a structure of the size and of the beauty of the gates to Canterbury Cathedral. Even in the modern age, and for someone like myself, the vista felt magical and inspiring.

I’d been thinking, during the last stages of my walk, of what I was going to say at the entrance of the cathedral in order to gain admission. I knew that (because of the tourist industry) there was a sizable entrance fee, but there was absolutely no way that I thought the cathedral could expect me to pay that. Not only because I was on a pilgrimage, but also because of the reasons for my pilgrimage. And so, as I approached the main gate, I wondered what my reception would be. I saw an attendant, by the swing gate which was adjacent to the queue full of tourists waiting to pay their entrance fee, and explained;

“Excuse me Sir, I’m just completing a pilgrimage from the ruins of Barking Abbey and I wondered if I may pass to say a prayer in the Crypt?” I asked.

“Oh, no problem,” he replied, and he then immediately opened up the swing gate in order to let me pass.

“Blimey, that wasn’t too bad... and just how it should be!” I thought.

The sight that greets you, after you pass through the Cathedral Gate, is another picture to behold. On this day, and as I looked upon it, the cathedral’s twin towers were silhouetted by a perfectly clear and light blue sky. The cathedral stood majestically in its beauty, and I wondered how on earth it could have been built by the hand of man and without any machinery at all. It may have been built as a testament to God, but to me it was a testament to the capability of the men who built it.

How did they do that? Answers on a postcard to:

“How on earth did they do that?” competition - PO Box M1 G0D!!!

I then wandered into the cathedral itself and I was confronted with even more of its majesty. I walked along the north aisle, on the outside of the nave, and along to the quire, before reaching the Trinity Chapel. I couldn’t help but be taken by how magnificent it all was. I always thought that St. Margaret’s Church (by the ruins of Barking Abbey) was exceptional in its beauty inside, but you could take that “exception”, times it by ten, and you may still not achieve the remark-ability of the interior of Canterbury Cathedral itself.

I carried on walking, back along the south aisle, and at a very slow pace, taking in the size of the chambers, the height of the pillars supporting the archways, the adorning statues, the stone mason carvings and the true magnificence of the stain glassed windows. I completed a full clockwise circle of the main chambers of the cathedral before I ventured down into the crypt.

This was it then, the end of my pilgrimage, and as I walked down the steps (and into the chamber of the crypt) I finally began to feel the sense of completion and finality. It was dark as I initially entered, but it was not as dark as I expected. Subtle electric lighting was immediately introduced to me and it presented some dome like chambers (which were set back into the walls and gave the feeling of manmade caverns). As I walked further along, the crypt opened up and natural light showered in from some exterior windows. I once again completed a full circuit (and in a clockwise direction) before I entered the Chapel of St. Mary in order to light my candles and say my prayers.
The Chapel of St. Mary exists in the centre of the crypt, and the altar resides before some chairs, which form a single row, in a line that can be best described as a “U” shape. The “chapel” is not enclosed by walls, but instead is open to the rest of the crypt, with only a gap in the middle of the row of chairs designating the entrance to its “nave”. There is a step, with a low barrier, before the altar and on each side of this barrier there is a stand which hosts the tea light candles which can be lit in prayer. As I entered, I took my backpack off and placed it by one of the chairs. I then approached the raised step (which was set before the statue of St. Mary) and knelt down to say a prayer of thanks for my safe arrival and for all the kindness I had been shown by people throughout my journey.

I then said another prayer, re-affirming the reasons for my pilgrimage - I prayed for the world in which I wished to live and I prayed that Brian Haw would be remembered... and I thanked him once again.

After I did that, I went to the candle box and I took one to light. I lit the candle, from the flame of one that was already alight on the candle stand, and I returned to my kneeling position (while holding it) and said a prayer for the good health of all my family. After which I placed the candle on the stand and returned to take another candle from the box, lighting it from the one I had just placed, before returning to my kneeling position once more. While holding this candle I said a prayer for Canon Gordon Tarry, for his congregation and for all the people of Barking, wishing them peace and love.

I then placed this candle on the stand and took another one to light from the one I had just placed. I knelt again to say a prayer for all of my closest friends, who I had so much love for, and I went onto place the candle once more. I took another candle, lit it, and I knelt to pray for the abundance of Andy and Val and for the good grace that they would be successful in all that they do. I went onto place that candle on the stand, before taking another and repeating the process of lighting it before kneeling down to pray once more. This time I said a prayer of thanks to all the people who were kind to me and who had helped me on my journey – I wished them peace and love too.

I placed that candle on the stand and took another one to light. With this one I prayed for the world in which I wished to live – a world which is not controlled by money, but is filled with peace, love and truth. I rose from my kneeling position and I placed it on the candle stand, before I went to take my last one to say my last prayer.

I took a candle and lit it, by the flame of my last, and I knelt down to say a prayer for Brian Haw. I prayed in thanks for all he had done, I prayed that he would rest in peace and I prayed that he would never be forgotten.

After a period of time I arose once more and went over to the candle stand to place my seventh and last candle. There was a donation box by the stand and I wondered how much I should give? As much as I felt was right, I guessed, and I figured that ten pence for each candle was reasonable. They didn’t cost that much to produce, and the church had a lot more money than I did, so I thought that that was fair enough.

I paid my last respects and I left the Chapel of St. Mary. I then continued to depart from the crypt itself, walking up the set of steps (on its south side) to re-enter the cathedral. As I entered the light once more, and came out by the quire, I felt a sense of a “job well done” (that may seem like a poor use of terminology to
describe the moment, but it is the phrase which best expresses the feeling I had at the time) and I felt pleased that I had finally completed my undertaking.

But what was I going to do next? I looked around and saw that there was a passageway leading underneath the quire. I hadn’t been through there before and so I followed it to come out by the entrance to the crypt once again. When I reached that point, I became aware of singing emanating from outside, and so, being quite inquisitive, I decided to follow the sound and I immediately discovered the door which led out into the cloisters.

As soon as I opened the metal latch, and went through the large wooden door*, I was bathed in the heavenly vibrations from the sound of the Cathedral Choir. The sound was magical, and as I walked further along the cloisters (and peered through its “windowless” window arches) I saw the choir’s entire accompaniment, standing in rows together, on the grass and in the middle of the cloister square. They were all dressed in civilian clothes, so it was clear that they were rehearsing... and what a rehearsal! I found my way around to the east side of the cloister and sat on a windowless ledge to watch (and hear!) them.

As I sat there, enjoying the direct rays of the sunshine once more, I was completely taken with the moment. It was so, so beautiful. I’d never (in all of my life) heard such a sweet and pure sound before.

But nay... I am serving the description of its vibration an injustice, for it possessed qualities far from the reaches of pure beauty... as twas a sound, simply scribed... as angelic.

The choir continued to practice, ceasing their singing at points, and repeating different phases in order to achieve their perfection, but the short interruptions mattered not to me as all I felt was the warmth of the sun as their sweet song appeared to massage my very being, and in the moments when they were in full accord... the feeling I felt... was heavenly.

Within half an hour, their practice session had come to an end and the people, who created that most wonderful reverberation, went their separate ways and divided into groups composed of only fractions of their entire accompaniment. I sat for a while longer and then I decided that it was time to leave. It was just before two o’clock and I felt like the time was right to find Miriam.

I peacefully left the tranquillity of the cloisters and the confines of Canterbury Cathedral. I walked out of the Cathedral Gates and into the sunshine that was saturating the small medieval square in Sun Street.

* In January 2012 (while I was on my “Pilgrimage Re-visited” and taking the pictures to accompany this account) I entered the cloisters via the same wooden door and saw two tourists (further along the corridor) being given a tour by one of the Cathedral Guides. Literally, just at the moment when I passed by the small group, the guide pointed to the ceiling of the cloister (which is adorned with many symbols within its beautiful stonework) and said;

“Half of all the symbols you see here are Pagan in their origin.”

Those were the only words I heard him say (to the tourists) as I passed, and it was just before I took the photo of the cloisters. I only mention this because it was very peculiar (the way it happened) and it does give some legitimacy to the statement I made, earlier in this book, at the point where I encountered Benjamin.
I’d had the feeling all day that I shouldn’t be in a hurry to locate Miriam, and that if I was meant to meet up with her on this day, then I would do – no matter what I did – and if I wasn’t meant to meet her, then I wouldn’t – no matter what I did! I was still hoping that I would catch up with her (because I hadn’t seen her in such a long time), but if I didn’t materialise then I always had the cricket plan to fall back on. I then wondered that if I did see Miriam, maybe she’d like to go to the twenty20 cricket as well, that would be great... but it was very unlikely I had to admit!

I had no idea which direction to take and I only knew that Miriam worked in the farmers market hall in Canterbury. When we were on our hike, along Offa’s Dyke, she’d told me much about it and said that it was an amazing little place, where all the food sold was sourced and produced locally. She said that all the stalls were run by people who cared about the quality of the food they were selling and who only wanted to produce the best quality product for their customers. Although Miriam only earned a modest annual salary, her and her boyfriend bought all of their food from the market because:

“You are what you eat... and one the finest pleasures in life is to eat good food,” and ”It doesn’t cost that much more to eat well,” she said.

The market apparently had everything you could want, from a fish mongers to a bakers, from a stall of fruit and vegetables to a stall offering fine wine. There was even a coffee shop available, during the day, and a restaurant at night. Miriam worked for a guy who ran a traditional store, in the market, and she said she really enjoyed serving their customers in a time-honoured way.

She told me that she loved working there, not only because of the markets ethics, but also because of the sense of community that it created. Miriam was from Holland, and she said that the market had a wonderful atmosphere and that it was a very “English” place indeed, what with all of it’s characters and their eccentricities.

It sounded totally like a place for me then... but where the hell was it?!!

I immediately asked a couple of people walking by (but they didn’t know) before I finally managed to gain directions from an elderly couple who I felt I could rely on.

They told me that;

”I had to go that way, then that way, to keep going that way, before I went that way, and after I’d gone that way, I should’ve pretty much found my way! Oh... but I could also go this way, after I’d kept going that way, and then I’d just have to go this way again, in order to find another way. But... on second thoughts, it’d probably be a bit quicker to go the first way. Although... whichever way I went, it really didn’t matter."

”And what was the first way again?” I asked!!!

I followed the directions along Mercery Lane, chucked a right along the High Street, followed it up to the impressive City Gate and crossed the road, by a pedestrian crossing, in order to continue on. Right by the traffic lights there was a delightful looking pub, and as I passed I saw that the Championships at Wimbledon were on the TV screen inside the bar. I noted and logged it, and thought that whatever happened at least my afternoon’s entertainment was now sorted out – Andy Murray was in the Semi-final!

I continued up the road and chucked another right turn, that led me towards Canterbury Railway Station, and just beyond it was the hall that was occupied by “The Goods Shed” farmers market. I arrived at its steps, walked up them, and entered via the markets main doors... and my first impression was... that Miriam was
absolutely right! What a beautiful little place! Full of life and exuding quality, and speaking of quality - where was Miriam?

I turned to my right once more, and alongside the aisle I saw a food counter with “you know who” standing behind it.

“Top drawer!” I thought, as I walked along the aisle and readied myself to surprise Miriam.

She was dealing with a customer at the time, and so I waited until she had finished. When she finally did, her attention turned to the next person in the queue... and that person was... me!

“Lee... you made it!” she exclaimed, and then came around the other side of the counter to give me a big hug.

“It’s good to see you,” I said in reply, as I returned the hug.

“I didn’t know if I’d see you, I’m leaving for Dartmoor (with Piers) tomorrow,” she said.

“Well, it looks like I’ve arrived in the nick of time then!” I replied, being cheeky, and then “Is it still cool to stay?”

“Of course! It’s lovely to see you,” she said delightfully.

“And you too,” I reponded, with a big smile.

I noticed a gentleman standing behind the counter, watching us with interest. It was Miriam’s governor and as I looked to acknowledge him she gave a short introduction.

“Oh... Lee, this is Lee, the friend I met when I walked the Offa’s Dyke path, and Lee, this Lee, my boss!” she expressed quite comically.

“Nice to meet you mate,” Lee said to me, as he offered his hand (across the counter) to shake.

“And you too,” I said to Lee, as I reached out to shake his hand in return.

“Oh, Lee’s a West Ham fan too... I’ve told him a lot about you,” Miriam then interjected... to either of us, or neither of us, or twieither of us... I couldn't actually work it out... but it seemed to make sense whomever she was addressing!

“Ah, nice one,” Lee said, with a smile.

“Yeah, nice one,” I replied, with some style.

“My son’s West Ham too, he’s here somewhere,” Lee went on to say.

And as we both looked around, a little kid came mooching into view... but this kid wasn’t just any old kid though, this kid had something special about him, because this kid was wearing... a West Ham United football shirt! Come on!!!

You see now... I’m not making this up, but actually, and on this occasion, I really wish I was, because the next moment was (once again) a touch embarrassing...

“Alright matey,” I declared, and then “Come on you Irons!” with the full and mandatory excitement the moment completely required.

But the kid just stared blankly back at me, with an expression that was clearly saying “Who the hell are you, you nut bag!” etched on his face.

I couldn’t believe it! What was up with kids these days? Why didn’t they know that supporting the same football team was such an amazing thing?!? Were they ever going to grow up?!!!

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” Lee said to me “He’s just a bit shy.”

“That’s alright,” I said, and then I shook the little fellows hand and managed to
get a smile out of him!

“Lee’s just walked all the way from Barking,” Miriam then explained to her boss.

“Barking?!” Lee said, with a tone that expressed familiarity and surprise.

“Yeah, on a pilgrimage,” I stated “Why? Do you know it?” I enquired, after picking up on his tone.

“Yeah I do, and I don’t think that you get many people from Barking doing what you’ve just done. Fair play to you though,” he said and nodded in further acknowledgement.

Lee then had to serve a customer, and I continued to spend a few moments more speaking with Miriam.

“You’re lucky to have found me. I only started work at two o’clock! Have you just arrived in Canterbury?” Miriam asked.

“No, I got to the cathedral at about eleven, and I just had a feeling that I didn’t need to rush before I came to find you,” I answered.

“And what would you have done if I wasn’t here?!” she continued to ask.

“Well, someone would’ve known where I could find you, wouldn’t they?” I explained in a questioning kind of way.

“What are you like?” Miriam then said, with a smile and a touch of exasperation!

“And if they couldn’t, then I was just going to go and watch the cricket. Essex are playing Kent tonight, in the twenty20, do fancy going?” I asked in hope.

“No, I’ve still got some packing to do, but I can cook you a nice meal tonight and we can catch up,” she stated.

I thought that was an even better plan, and I was so grateful that I had a friend like Miriam. It had been over nine months since we had parted company (on the Clwydian Mountain range in North Wales) and the only contact we’d had since consisted of a Christmas card and a few emails. Yet we clicked again straight away, and it was if no time had passed since we had last been in each others company.

“Ah, that’ll be lovely,” I replied, really, really pleased.

“Well, I’m finishing work at some point between six and seven o’clock, and if you can keep yourself entertained for the afternoon, you can meet me here, when I finish, and we can walk back to my house together,” Miriam offered.

“Diamond, sounds top drawer... the tennis is on this afternoon, so I can go down the pub. I saw one on the way here... by that big old castle gate,” I explained.

“What... the West Gate?” Miriam questioned.

“Yeah, I guess so, there’s a pub just across the road from it. It’s got lovely windows and it’ll be a nice place to watch the tennis in, what with the view and all,” I said.

“Yes - the pub’s called the West Gate too, Lee,” Miriam stated, while looking at me with a smile and as if I was a muppet!

“Oh, is it? Well I don’t know, do I? I’ve only just arrived on this manor! I just saw that it was in a nice place and had a TV with the tennis on!” I said, while beginning to laugh.

We then arranged that I’d go to the pub for the afternoon, and if she finished work before I finished watching the tennis, then she’d come and meet me in the pub... and if I finished watching the tennis before she finished work, then I’d come and meet her at the Goods Shed. And if we both happened to finish at the same time... then there would be no doubt that we’d meet somewhere in between the pub
and the Goods Shed en route!

You see... easy peasy lemon squeasy... who needs a mobile phone?!!!

But first, seeing as I wasn’t going to be attending the cricket match after all (and so I wouldn’t be able to hitch a lift back to Essex) I needed to go to the bus station in the centre of Canterbury. I did so, found out the times of the buses to London, and bought my ticket. The bus was actually going to take me to the Blue Water Shopping Centre (how appropriate!), whereby I’d have to catch another bus through the Dartford Tunnel to the Lakeside Shopping Centre (how doubly appropriate!!). From there I could be picked up by my family and be taken back to Barking. All I had to do now was find a public pay phone (that took money!) in order to arrange.

And here’s another thing, however, that I haven’t mentioned in my account thus far, but of which I discovered the full extent of while I was on my Pilgrimage.

There was a time when there were copious amounts of usable British phone boxes saturating the English countryside. Every small village was served by one and sometimes they appeared in even the remotest of places. Perhaps not every single phone was in full working order throughout the totality of its existence, but they were there and if you had some coinage in your pocket you could pretty much rely on them being usable if you needed to contact someone... but not anymore.

Throughout my experience, while walking through Kent, public telephone boxes were quite difficult to come by, and if I was lucky enough to find one, I was rarely fortunate enough to be able to use it! And this wasn’t because it was out of order... it was because they simply didn’t accept “physical money” anymore! And the one means I had of keeping in touch with my family (during my journey) was seldom available to me.

It was another real eye opener and it gave me another sense of a “freedom lost”. Of course, there are reasons for this circumstance to now be the case, but unfortunately those reasons appear to have more to do with the turning of a financial profit than it had to do with the preservation of a wonderful public facility. I found it sad (throughout my pilgrimage) that no matter how much financial success the telecommunications industry appears to enjoy... the only thing that really seems to matter to it, is the making of more and more money.

Being in a city centre, however, it wasn’t too difficult to locate a payphone (which took coins!) and it was good to speak to my family again. After I’d let them know how I was, I made the arrangements to be picked up at Lakeside the following day. I then got a little bit of grub and wandered down the road to eat my lunch in the grounds of Canterbury Castle (it was lovely!). After which I then retraced my steps to just past the (actual!) West Gate, and crossed the road to enter the finest thing in all of the civilised world... and on this occasion it was called - The West Gate Inn.

I strolled up to the bar and ordered myself a pint, and I was shocked to discover that the cost of my pint was only £1.80! That was about half the price a pint would normally cost (at most other pubs and at this point in the twenty first century) and it turned out that the pub I was in belonged to Wetherspoons...

(For those who are not familiar with the name “Wetherspoons”, it is a company that owns a chain of pubs (which is growing larger and larger by the year) throughout the United Kingdom. They are a chain of pubs which continue the “traditional” formula for a public house, whereby their primary aim is to be a place to eat, drink
and converse, with no music or bar games in existence. The chain also put’s an emphasis on the selling of locally produced Real Ales.

During the early nineteen-nineties (I noticed) there was a trend for many pubs (in Great Britain) to become transformed into American themed sports bars, and real ale’s had almost completely disappeared from the taps of most public houses. However, the continued success of the Wetherspoon pub chain (throughout the period since) seems to have coincided (at least in my opinion) with a reversal of that trend and a huge resurgence in the demand for Real English Ale. As a result, I feel comfortable in my assumption that the Wetherspoon chain of pubs played a part in the reversal of fortunes for English Ale and in halting the fashion for pubs to “go American” by proving that most British people “really didn’t want to”.

But (and there’s always a but isn’t there!) the continued growth of Wetherspoons has resulted in the company being able to under-cut the prices of other players in the market (and by huge amounts) and this has had the consequence of making it very difficult for other “privately owned” pubs to compete, and so possibly leading to their closure. It could also be argued that the Wetherspoon business model (itself) is actually nothing more than a “Theme Bar Concept” with all of its pubs having an “off the shelf” feel to them as a result of a restriction to their individual uniqueness through their shared commonality.

In short, and in summary, they are a “double-edged sword” if ever there was one!!!)

... and so it was clear that what little money I had, was going to go a long way! I wandered back to the front of the pub and was lucky enough to find a small table, in front of the large television, by a window looking out onto the stunning, and imposing, Canterbury City West Gate. The worn green and brown lawns of Wimbledon were displayed upon the television screen and I felt very comfortable as I sat down.

“Perfection! Absolutely perfect,” I thought, but then I discovered a flaw in my abject delight... there was no sound emanating from the TV... it was a Wetherspoons Pub!!!

“I can’t be having this,” I thought “I can’t watch sport without the sound!”

There was no atmosphere, and as I looked around the small area (that was sectioned off by a pillar made of bricks) there was a group of about six people occupying the table next to me and trying to watch the tennis too.

“Does anyone mind if I turn the TV up?” I asked, directly to the group.

“No... by all means!” came the unanimous and enthusiastic reply.

I then got up and began in my attempt to figure out how exactly you work a modern television without the aid of a remote control! Even though the challenge is on par with that of trying to find a button to gain access to the hidden chambers of an Egyptian Pyramid, I thought “There’s got to be a way!” and would you believe it, I got lucky within thirty seconds, finding the manual volume control hidden to the side of the appliance and behind the lip of the screen!

After I’d set the volume to a strategic pitch (which could be heard in the immediate vicinity and no further) I received a round of applause from the appreciative pub crowd! I took a bow!!!

“We all wanted to do that!” one person said.
Once perfection had finally been created, I sat back down to enjoy the tennis (and the remainder of the first semi-final) while awaiting the start of the second (which was Andy Murray versus Rafael Nadal). Every now and then a member of the bar staff would come around to collect the empty glasses and each time they would hesitate as they heard the sound from the TV... but then they used their own discretion and turned a blind eye to it, seeing as the volume wasn’t loud enough to disturb anyone else.

There was a very nice atmosphere in our section of the pub and I frequently engaged in banter with the group of professional people, to the side of me, and as we watched the tennis. We were all there ready to support Andy Murray, on his big day in the Championships, and the hottest topic of debate was whether or not:

A) Being English, should we really be supporting Andy Murray at all considering the comments he’d made about England in the past?

and

B) Exactly what was his nationality anyway?

We all decided (and it was quite an obvious decision it has to be said) that we had to support him, regardless of what he may have said in the past, and that if he won he was most certainly British... but if he lost he was definitely Scottish! Such are the divisions which exist on the Island of Great Britain, but it was all in good jest!

Just as Djokovic was coming to the end of his victorious semi-final, a couple turned up and asked me if anyone one was sitting at the small table close to where I sat. I replied that there wasn’t and made more room in order to let them sit down. They had come to watch the tennis too and immediately joined in the good humour of the Andy Murray debate. They seemed like a very nice couple, who were good company, and so it didn’t take long for us to make our introductions.

Judith and Tony were visiting Canterbury in order to see their friend being ordained into the Church and they were looking forward to the ceremony (which was going to be taking place the very next day). Judith asked me about myself and I explained the reasons for me being in Canterbury too;

“I’ve just completed a pilgrimage from the ruins of Barking Abbey to Canterbury Cathedral. I had a beautiful journey,” I explained.

“What a wonderful thing to do,” Judith said with much heart.

“It was, absolutely, I met so many kind people... the worlds full of them,” I replied.

“If you don’t mind me asking... what made you do such a thing?” Judith enquired.

“I basically did it in remembrance of a man called Brian Haw, who I think was a very special man. He died a couple of weeks ago and I just wanted to do something to mark my respect. He was the man who had been protesting for peace, in Parliament Square, for the past ten years... and it ultimately cost him his life,” I informed her.

Both Judith and Tony indicated that they were aware of Brian, but they didn’t realise he had died so recently. They appeared very interested in the reason for my pilgrimage and so I continued to explain;
“I also did it for the world in which I wish to live – a world which is not controlled by money, but is filled with peace, love and truth,” I said.

To be honest, I felt a bit odd saying the second part in that moment. I’m not exactly sure why, but maybe it was because it sounded ever so “hippy-ish”, or at the least very religious, and I’m not really either. Judith smiled in response and I noticed Tony giving me a questioning look (but not one that was judgemental in any way).

Then Andy Murray suddenly arrived on the TV (and on the Centre Court at Wimbledon) to the jubilant cheers of the pub (and Wimbledon) crowd;

“Come on Murray! - Go on son! – Let’s be having it today! - Come on son! – Go on Murray! – Are you English in disguise! – Come on the Jock!” the pub crowd cried!

After the players began their warm up, we all settled down again, and me and Judith (and Tony) continued our conversation. They seemed even more intrigued about what I was doing in Canterbury;

“So where is Barking then?” Judith asked.

“It’s in East London (or Essex if you go by the postal address) and the Abbey used to be one of the most powerful in England. William the Conqueror lived there for a while, after the Battle of Hastings, and Captain James Cook was even married there. But the most amazing thing is that, just before I left on my Pilgrimage, I read an article about Brian Haw and it said that he was born in Barking too!!! I couldn’t believe it, but it made it feel even more special and a bit more meant to be in fact,” I divulged.

“I believe in that... that things like that happen for a reason,” Judith expressed.

“Are you Spiritual at all then Judith?” I then questioned.

“Yes... I think I’m at the start of something, I certainly feel that way. There’s something more to all this, something more to life. Tony’s not so sure. But he’s supportive of me,” Judith answered.

I looked toward Tony and he took that as a cue to explain himself in his own words;

“I’m just a bit sceptical. I need to see the proof if I’m going to believe that there’s something else to this world,” Tony stated, in a tone of voice which expressed he had an open mind to the possibility.

“Well, the thing is Tony,” I said “It’s not up to anyone else to prove it to you, it’s something that you have to discover for yourself, and the evidence is all around you. Reality is an illusion that responds to your thoughts, and you’ll see that if you pay attention to your thoughts and the nature of what’s happening in your reality.

The world isn’t real, it’s just an energy vibration, and even science proves that. This table is made up of energy in the form of atoms and they, in turn, are predominantly surrounded by nothing more than space! So in theory, and if it was small enough, I should be able to put my finger right through this table because most of it’s not really there!”

Tony’s questioning look continued, but he was still listening and so I carried on.

“You only think it’s there because that’s what your senses are telling you. But the thing is, you don’t see the table with your eyes and you don’t feel the table with your skin... you see and feel the table with your brain, and your brain interprets the electrical messages it receives from your eyes and from your skin based on what it’s been conditioned to believe is possible,” I said.
Oh my God... did I just say all that, out loud, and in a pub?! Well, there goes another potential friendship down the drain” I thought.

Based on my previous experience’s, after saying something like that, so bluntly, people never wanted to speak to me again and sometimes even walked out to leave me sitting there on my own! But luckily, on this occasion, Andy Murray came to the rescue...

“Come on Murray! - Go on son! – Go on Murray!” the pub crowd cheered as the gladiators (armed with only tennis racquets and lots of balls!) readied themselves to commence battle. I took a swig from my beer and looked back towards Tony... and, gor blimey, he was still there!

“Do you want another drink?” he asked “I’m going to get a round in.”

“Err, blimey, are you sure?” came my ridiculously English response “Err, yeah, I’ll have another Ruddles then please, thank you,” I answered after receiving a mandatory nod from Tony’s head.

Tony then strolled off to the bar and left me “alone” with Judith, a pale blue Scotsman (who by some accounts, always struggled to respond to the balls of his opponent) and a tanned brown Spanish guy (who by all accounts, was a master at smashing everyone’s balls!).

Judith smiled at me and said;

“I’m very lucky to have Tony, especially at this time. I feel like I should be exploring the spiritual side of my life and sometimes it’s a worry because people may think you’ve gone bonkers!” Judith shared with me, and then “Maybe he does think I’m mad, but he just doesn’t say!” she jokingly finished.

I laughed, and then replied;

“I make you right, he seems like a good man. He just offered to buy me a drink after what I just said, so he can’t be that bad! It’s nice that he has an open mind though, I like that, and it’s all that really matters.”

We continued to watch the tennis and Tony eventually returned with the drinks. After placing them on the small table he then held out his hand showing his coinage;

“Look at the change I just got from a tenner, I can’t believe it... it’s impossible to spend your money in this place!” he exclaimed.

“That’s Wetherspoons for you!” I said “Do you know what, I heard a story about the guy who started up Wetherspoons - and it might just be an urban myth, so don’t quote me on it – but apparently his name’s not “J.D. Wetherspoon” at all... apparently that was the name of a teacher he once had at school, who told him that “he would never amount to anything”. The story goes that he named the business after his teacher as a joke!”

“I didn’t know that,” Tony said with a laugh.

“That’s fantastic!” Judith said while smiling too.

“Well, like I said, I don’t know if it’s the truth... but it’s a great story anyway!” I declared.

Andy Murray started the game well and we continued to speak, with our conversation being punctuated by the action in the tennis match. It continued to flip between focusing on the game and subjects similar to what we had already been discussing;

“Do you think he’s going to go one better than Henman then?” I asked openly.
“Oh, I do hope so... it’d be great to have someone British in the Final,” Judith replied and then asked “Anyway, what will you be doing after this ends?”

“Oh, I’m staying at my friends place (Miriam) tonight. She’s still working at the moment, but you’ll see her later as she should be coming down to meet me here after she finishes,” I explained.

“Nice girl is she?” Tony then asked me, in a “nudge, nudge, wink, wink” kind of way!

“Yeah she is, probably the nicest girl I’ve ever met actually, but it’s nothing like that... she’s got a boyfriend. All the best ones are taken hey,” I said with a defeatist look towards Tony, and then I said “Hello Judith!” jokingly, and with a cheeky little wink!

We all laughed, and Judith continued with her line of questioning;

“How do you know Miriam?” she asked.

“I met her when I was walking along the Offa’s Dyke path last year. She was doing the hike too and we just hooked up. The trail was truly magical in places. There were points along the English and Welsh boarder that felt really remote and the countryside was so enchanting. I haven’t seen her since, so it was good to see her again today,” I explained.

“And what will you do after that?” Judith enquired.

“I’ll just carry on doing what I’m doing and living outside of the system,” I answered.

“You’re living outside of the system, but how do you manage that?” Judith asked in amazement.

“I just help others and allow others to help me, basically. I’ve been living in communities, or with friends, and just working for my keep. It’s been amazing actually and it doesn’t cost much to live when you haven’t got rent or a mortgage to pay,” I said.

“But you must need some money, so how do you get by?” Tony asked with equal astonishment.

“Well, sometimes I’ve done jobs for people (and mainly for my family) and I haven’t expected to get paid for doing them... but because I’ve helped people out... they usually want to give me something back in return... and if there’s nothing they can practically do for me, then they give me some money... just to help me out. But the point for me is that we’re not focusing on the money... we’re just focusing on helping each other. And that’s what my pilgrimage was about too... because I don’t want to live in a world where people only focus on money... I want to live in a world where people’s focus is on helping each other,” I said, while momentarily getting a bit emotional, but managing to contain it.

Tony and Judith just looked at me with a mixed expression of respect and wonder.

“But doesn’t anyone take advantage of you?” Judith interjected with a good question.

“No, not really, because I choose who I help and I only help people who I feel have a good heart, and if anyone wasn’t appreciative of me and took a liberty, then I’d tell them where to go or just jog on. But, to be fair, I have that attitude to paid work anyway! What’s really been nice though, is having the time to help my family out and do all the jobs that no-one has been able to do because they’ve all been so busy working or doing other things – like, for example, I just finished boarding out my Mum’s loft the other week,” I explained.
“YES! - Come on Murray! – Go on Murray!” the pub crowd erupted in jubilation! The “sweaty sock” had just won the first set and was beating the Spaniard on the hallowed turf of Wimbledon’s Centre Court! “He can do this!” everyone thought!

I finished my beer and then went to buy another round of drinks, but Tony literally stopped me dead in my tracks and wouldn’t allow it.

“You keep your money and sit down. I’ll get these, it’s no problem,” he stated, while accepting none of my protests in reply...

Again, I was struck by the generosity and the kindness of people who were all but strangers to me and when you receive that kind of kindness, it’s all so much more appreciated because it is so unexpected. I realised that there were times (during my travels and when I was younger) when I didn’t accept such acts of generosity so easily, perhaps because I thought I may be taking a liberty or that I was just too proud.

I’ve learnt since then (and through all those experiences) that by accepting a gift you are actually giving a gift... because there is no greater sense of fulfilment then to know that you have been kind to someone and that you have helped them in some way. And to deny any help that you have been offered (if you need it, that is) is quite a selfish act and has more to do with one’s own ego than it has to do with ones own humanity. And I think that’s why I have this sense that the only way forward for the evolving human race is to help others and to allow others to help you.

“It’s not about the money, money, money...” - Jessie J

... The second set of the tennis match began and Tony returned with the drinks.

“Thanks mate, I really appreciate that,” I said.

“Not a problem, you enjoy it,” Tony said as he took his seat once more.

The disjointed conversation continued throughout the periodic cheers of encouragement for the Scotsman on the screen... and the comments of admiration for the talent demonstrated by his Spanish contemporary.

For some reason the “professional” crowd had to leave the establishment, in order to go somewhere else, and they said their goodbye’s to me, while vacating the table in the centre of the room. It was the prime location for viewing the match, so we took the opportunity to re-locate to the “Band A” seating and after we settled down once more Judith happened to ask me if I bothered to vote;

“Not anymore, I’m not even on the electoral register. Democracy’s a lie... so what’s the point participating with it? I figure that whatever you participate in, you give your power to, so there’s no way I’m giving my power to that falsehood. There’s no real choice anyway, and if you do play the game, then all I think you’re doing is encouraging the disgraceful nonsense to continue,” I said, while explaining my point of view.

“I understand that, but what alternative is there?” Judith questioned.

“Well, I’d vote if there was a “none of the above” box available on a voting slip, but they won’t do that will they. And I’d vote if politicians were actually held accountable for the promises they make and their manifestos were treated as “contracts” with the people. In every other walk of life, if you have a contract with
someone (whether it’s verbal or written) you have to fulfil that contract or you break the law! But politicians can say what they want - in order to get elected - and are never held accountable if they don’t fulfil their word!

Any other person who got a job under false pretences, or who broke the terms of their contract, would get the sack! But these people are a law unto themselves and all they appear to care about is their own personal progression! What a load of bollocks it all is! Oh... sorry,” I said, while holding up my hand and apologising to Judith because I realised that I’d just sworn in front of her.

“It’s ok,” she replied with a smile, and Tony smiled too.

“But fundamentally, I don’t do politics because I think politics is anti-spiritual, and it’s anti-spiritual because it seems to be more about people craving power than it is about people telling the truth,” I finished by saying.

Judith and Tony both attested that they couldn’t disagree and we pretty much left the conversation where it was as we turned our full attention to the Championships at Wimbledon. The banter continued, but our joyous applause for the British number one slowly turned into concerned encouragement as Rafa Nadal accomplished victory in the second set, and with apparent ease.

The game was in the balance, and Tony took the opportunity to get another round of drinks in, but when the Spaniard efficiently repeated the same success in the third set our hope was fading fast. There was only one thing for it... Tony repeated his expedition to the bar and purchased another round of drinks!!!

Even though the match had turned the wrong way, because of the company I was keeping, it was still a very enjoyable afternoon. Murray persevered with a fight back, during the fourth set, and the late afternoon became early evening. At a time of just after six o’clock I saw Miriam come into the pub and I called out to her;

“Miriam!” I hollered across the pub.

She couldn’t hear me, and so I went over to her and brought her back to our table in order to introduce her to Judith and Tony. It was a short introduction, as Miriam informed me that she had only popped by to see if I was still here and that she was going to go back to The Goods Shed. The game was reaching the final moments of the fourth set, but because Andy Murray was making a match of it again, I couldn’t be sure if it would be ending sooner or later, and so we just decided that I’d meet her (at her place of work) as soon as the game was over.

With that, Miriam said her apologies, her goodbyes and her pleased to meet you(s) to Judith and Tony... and departed the pub, leaving us with our fingers, our toes and our legs crossed in the hope of the commencement of a fifth set.

Alas, twas not meant to be, and Andy Murray (gallantly) crashed out of the Wimbledon Championships at the semi-final stage. It was like the days of Tim Henman all over again and after all the jovial debates about Andy Murray’s nationality, it turned out he was an Englishman!!!

It was time for me to leave, and I expressed my thanks and gratitude to Judith and Tony for a lovely afternoon. I said that I hoped that they had a nice time at the service the next day and we swapped email addresses, with the intention of staying in touch. They wished me well on my continued adventures and, after that, we said our goodbyes with a hug and a shake of hands.

“What a lovely couple,” I thought as I left the pub, and then “That was nice.”
I made my way back to the farmers market and I met Miriam just as she was finishing up for the day. It was so nice to be there and to have finally come to the end of my pilgrimage. I wore a smile of contentment on my face. We departed the market, and proceeded to walk to the outskirts of Canterbury and towards the beautiful country lane that led to her home. Casually chatting as we walked, I told her about my adventures... my experiences... and my pilgrimage... and I told her about the stars that had made the show what it was.

My “celebrities” were showing me signs of mild discomfort as I spoke of them, but they were - well and truly - only that of the "D" list by then. They were slightly bruised and partially battered, but their days in the limelight were coming to end. They’d had a great career, and they had done their job, and no matter what way you looked at it... it wouldn’t have been the same pilgrimage without them.

Above:
The Star Makers
(Handmade in Israel)
Above Left: The first sight of Canterbury Cathedral
Above Right: The River Stour

Above Left: The River Stour, Canterbury
Above Right: Canterbury Castle

Left: Castle Street leading to St. Margaret’s Street
Right: The bank with the Black Horse before Mercery Lane
Left: Canterbury Cathedral
Gates in Sun Street

Right: Nearing the end at the Cathedral Gate

Left: Canterbury Cathedral

Right: The entrance to Canterbury Cathedral

Right: The view from the Cloisters
Below: The Cathedral Cloisters
Above:
Canterbury Cathedral
Left:
The West Gate
Below:
The West Gate Inn
Epilogue

The day after I returned to Barking a strange thing happened. It was the morning of Sunday 3rd July, 2011, and the weather was exceptional – the beginning of a perfect English summers day. I walked into the town centre, and to the shops along East St., and I heard the bells ringing from St. Margaret’s Church. I wasn’t planning on going back to the Abbey, but the sound of the bells compelled me to, as if beckoning me somehow. I followed them and walked into the Abbey grounds.

There were chairs laid out, in a couple of rows, by the bottom of the steps, in the area which was formerly the nave. I discovered that this was the day that the three Parishes of Barking held their joint annual Sunday Service, and that Canon Gordon Tarry had decided, because of the wonderful weather, to host it outside and in the ruins of Barking Abbey.

I sat down, upon the grass bank overlooking the nave, and took my place ready to enjoy the service. Slowly but surely, members of the three congregations arrived and took their places in the grounds, and Canon Gordon Tarry began by saying:

“Welcome to the ruins of Barking Abbey. This is a very Holy place. This has been a place of worship for over a thousand years and it’s such a lovely place for worship and reflection...”

It was such a beautiful day and it was lovely to stay throughout the service. I didn’t introduce myself to anyone and I departed just before the service was due to end. I just wished to be subtle in the moment, so that I could observe and enjoy the experience. It was nice to know that I’d seen the people from the congregation for whom I’d lit a candle, and said a prayer, when I arrived in the crypt at Canterbury Cathedral.

I felt like I’d come full circle on my journey and that this was the perfect ending to my Pilgrimage. I said a final prayer of thanks to everyone (and everything) that had helped me and for all those present... and then I remembered Brian.

After that... I slipped away...

A Pilgrimage is a very special thing to do. If you wish to be at one with yourself and with the world around you, if you know that the power your thoughts can make a difference... and if you want to Remember Brian, then I can think of no better way for all those pure intentions to be simultaneously realised. Remember Brian.
Dear Lee,

Well hello again! It was so lovely to meet you on Friday afternoon. It just seemed kind of “meant to be”. Or maybe that’s because I’m half-way through the Celestine Prophecy…….? Speaking of which, I’ve already looked-up The 4 Agreements whilst it was still on my mind, so I will be ordering that soon – thanks for the recommendation.

The Ordination service on Saturday was really special. There was such an amazing energy in the Cathedral you could actually feel it. It is a beautiful place. The music both from the choir and organ was absolutely heavenly. It was a very emotional occasion. Whatever one’s own spiritual beliefs, for those Ordinates entering ministry for the first time, you couldn’t ignore the enormity of their undertaking, and their faith. My friend is such a lovely woman. I can think of no-one better suited to a life in the church. It is a pity that, certainly in my personal experience, so few people in the church as a whole are quite so deserving. It is absolutely her calling, and for that reason alone I am thrilled that she is achieving her aspirations. She will be a great source of support, guidance and love for a great number of people – and that can only be a good thing.

I’m not sure it’s entirely appropriate to be star-struck by an Archbishop, but take a look at the attached photo.......... I don’t imagine I will ever again get the opportunity, so simply couldn’t let it pass by. I was quite tempted to make this my profile picture on Facebook, LOL! But I thought that might be just a bit TOO ostentatious!

Tony and I were both fascinated to hear about your life and the choices you have made. I think your decision to leave the stereotypical rat-race is really inspirational, and indeed very brave. I can’t imagine being strong enough to do that myself. But I truly take my hat off to you for doing it. It clearly brings much liberation – you seemed so peaceful and happy. I guess I’m lucky that at least I work for myself, a decision I took 6 years ago because I too was sick of the commercial mentality of the companies I’d worked for. My particular “skills” is in recruitment, which for them was always about how big the fee was – and very rarely about whether it was a genuine match between client and candidate so that both sides were benefitting in equal measure. As a consultant I never really fitted into that world. I always spent far too long on the personal relationships, and making absolutely sure that everyone was happy. It didn’t make me very popular back then when all my bosses were concerned with was how much money I’d made them.

So, working for myself means I can take control, and I can help the people I want to help. It’s also great because at the moment I need a lot of flexibility – my Mum is in the latter stages of dementia. Having been her primary carer for nearly 2 years, there have been times when I haven’t been able to work much at all. I think that
has been the start of me viewing the world through a slightly different pair of eyes. When she moved into a nursing home in January, it meant that for the first time in a pretty long time I could spend just a little time thinking my own thoughts (if that makes sense) instead of being simply consumed with what Mum needed. I therefore think it is no small “coincidence” that now is the time I seem to be embarking on something of a spiritual awakening.

I feel quite overwhelmingly that I have a definite journey ahead of me at the moment. I have no idea what I’m going to find along the way, but I have the sense of it being exciting and new. And although Tony is perhaps a little more sceptical than me (spiritually) he is totally supportive, so I am very lucky. I just check every now & then that he doesn’t think I’m COMPLETELY barking mad!!!!!!

I do hope we can keep in touch. It was such a genuine pleasure to meet you.

For now, take care.

Judith & Tony

xxxxx

Judith with the Arch Bishop of Canterbury
Saturday 2nd July, 2011
Please listen to

“Price Tag”

By

Jessie J

http://youtu.be/xu53w5Jh2GU

or

http://youtu.be/7rLTC67ReLq

featuring Shae White at Glastonbury
25th June 2011
Well Done Shae!

“Thank you to every person that has helped me along my path. Thank you for the love, thank you for the challenges, but most of all… thank you for giving me the opportunity to see my own reflection. I am most grateful.”

Lee D. Miller
A Word from Brian Haw…

“STOP KILLING OUR KIDS... it’s not rocket science is it?
Stop committing this genocide, this slaughter of the nations... looting the nations.
It’s about the oil folks... it’s about the arms industry.

And you know what, all those poor Arab kids... what did they do wrong?
What about our soldiers? We care for those boys... bring them home right now.

We want peace, we want love, we want justice for all.
We want to stop this madness!!!

I’ve been nominated The Most Politically Inspiring Person of the Year... you’re gonna regret that you know! Because it’s more than just a slap on the back, it’s more than saying ”Keep it up, Brian, jolly good!”

I’m on that pavement since June 2nd 2001. We were committing genocide for 11 long years before I came. We’ve got to stop... we’ve got to be decent... we’ve got to stand up... all the good people in the world.

So now, seeing as I’m now the most inspiring person... BE INSPIRED!!!!
It’s got to stop, hasn’t it... and it’s down to us.”

Brian Haw
Most Politically Inspiring Figure of the Year
(Voted for by Channel Four Viewers)
Channel Four News Awards 2007