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SIMON ARMITAGE



Further Travels with a Troubadour
on the South West Coast Path

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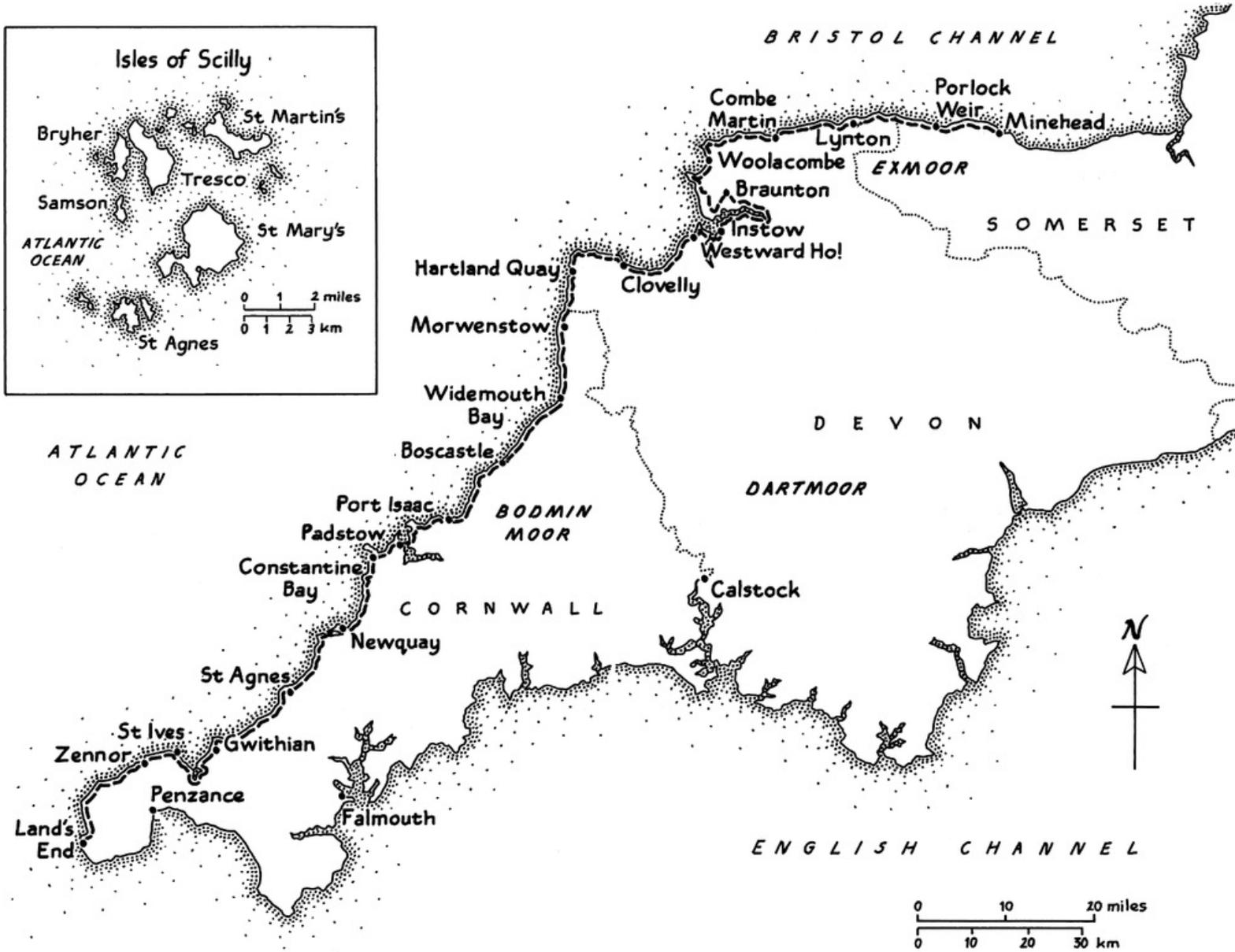
Walking Away

*Further Travels with a Troubadour
on the South West Coast Path*

ff

FABER & FABER

Map of the South West Coast Path



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Introduction

In 2010 I walked the Pennine Way, and wrote a book called *Walking Home*. The conventional compass bearing for that particular journey is one of south to north, to keep the British weather out of the eyes and get a push from behind by the prevailing wind, and consequently all the guidebooks and most of the signposts point the hiker in that direction. But I walked south, from Kirk Yetholm on the top side of the Scottish border towards Edale in Derbyshire, a distance of 265 miles, a journey which would take me the best part of three weeks. The idea was to walk home, back towards the village of Marsden where I was born and grew up and which continues to be the focus for much of my writing, especially my poems. Being situated close to the southern end of the trail I used the gravitational pull of that place as a way of moving continually, if slowly, forward. The potential embarrassment of failing to arrive in my own postcode served as a further incentive to keep going, especially through the cloudier, boggy and more forlorn sections of the walk, of which there were many. As well as a challenge to my physical resolve and mental stamina, I conceived the walk as a test of my poetic reputation, giving readings every night in village halls, pubs, churches and private houses in return for board and lodging. Up until the early nineties I'd been a probation officer in Greater Manchester – how far had I come in that time? I took no money with me, and passed a sock around at the end of each evening, asking people to put in whatever they thought I was worth (which wasn't always currency, and it was with a certain amount of both curiosity and trepidation that I slipped my hand into its lower reaches, never being too sure what my fingertips would discover). In fact in some ways I felt as if I was testing the reputation of poetry itself, wondering if an audience would turn out to hear spoken verse on a wet Wednesday in Wensleydale, and if there was a place in the contemporary world for a latter-day troubadour living on his wits and hawking his stanzas and stories from one remote community to the next. After the final audit, I declared a small financial surplus and an enormous emotional profit, though the demands of that journey on the body and the brain made me vow never to commit to such an undertaking again, because for all the beauty of the trail and the exhilaration of the experience, the Pennine Way is a brutal, punishing slog from start to finish.

Three years later, restlessness and imagination got the better of me. I convinced myself that my legs still had one last long-distance walk left in them, and started to think that *Walking Home* had only been half the project. If I really wanted to put myself on trial as a poet, rather than strolling around my home patch shouldn't I be striding out across the country in the opposite direction, getting further away with every step and spending time in places and with people as unfamiliar to me as I might be to them? After a few weeks of studying maps, totting up mileages and lining up cardinal points, I decided that a walk from Minehead in Somerset to Land's End in Cornwall offered a neat symmetrical opposite to the previous adventure. Specifically, the north coast of the South West Coast Path, a journey that by a quirk of maths is exactly the same distance as the Pennine Way. A walk this time not of boggy uplands, remote interiors, planted forests, unpopulated hillsides and uninhabitable moors, but a coastal journey, at sea level, in sunnier climes, through holiday destinations and tourist traps, towards accents and dialects different to mine and even into a

separate language. Then rather than come to an abrupt halt at that far and famous corner of Britain I'd overshoot, and go skimming across the sea to the Isles of Scilly. St Mary's, Treco, Bryher, Samson ... diminishing dots of land in the trailing ellipsis of the European archipelago, and the last opportunity for a public event in the UK before the vast, reader-less expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. Mystical Samson, whose population in the 2001 census is given by Wikipedia as '(1)'. I'd walk every day again, and read every night again, not stopping until I got to the end or the end got to me but this time rather than walking home I'd be walking away.

Gearing Up

I have bought a hat. And I have made a stick. And both these objects say a great deal about the journey I think I'm about to embark upon. The hat was something of an impulse purchase, given that I don't really have a head for hats, and in recent years have been happy to suffer whatever complaints come with an uncovered crown rather than risk embarrassment or insult. I learnt the hard way: West Yorkshire wasn't ready for the peaked sailing cap I went for in the early eighties; neither did it appreciate my 'pork-pie' brown trilby during the ska revival era, and the ceremonial black bearskin I bought from a jumble sale one winter made me the worn rather than the wearer, as well as an easy target for snowballs. My wife looks good in a hat, any hat, and my daughter would look good even under a plant pot or lampshade. It's a certain face that suits a hat, or a certain smile and I don't have either. My new hat, though, is no ordinary hat, as the dedicated display stand in Huddersfield Outdoor World and the price tag seemed to imply. For one thing, it's the only hat I've ever known that comes with an instruction manual, a four-page guide in small print with diagrams and specialist hat vocabulary explaining not just the practical aspects of hat ownership such as which way round it goes and how to put it on the head, but also the finer points of its design and functionality, as well as some conceptual issues relating to its philosophical significance in this world. Included within the terms of the guarantee is a lifetime insurance policy confirming that lost or damaged hats will be replaced by the supplier *at the drop of a hat*, as well as a strip of tear-off pre-printed slips – the hat equivalent of the business card – to hand to admirers and enquirers, of which there will be hundreds. Almost unwittingly I seem to have bought into some kind of cult or owners' club, members of which include mounted police, guides and trackers, musterers and herders, field scientists, jungle explorers, extreme gardeners and military personnel from across all terrains and territories. As far as my own needs go, the hat's 50-plus UV protection factor promises to shield me against heatstroke, its three-hundred-and-sixty-degree brim will offer shade to my face and neck, and any perspiration will be absorbed by its built-in sweatband. It's washable, breathable and carbon neutral. It's made from a natural fibre which if not used by the hat manufacturer would have only ended up in an illegal cigarette and should help to ingratiate me with some of Devon and Cornwall's more alternative communities. It comes in an environmentally sensitive autumnal brownish-green colour, ideal for blending in against a background of gorse slopes, seaweed-covered rocks and sandy coves. It boasts an inside pocket for money or plastic. Should the wind blow, the integrated bootlace can be looped under the chin and around the rear hemisphere of the head to prevent the hat blowing away over the edge of a precipice or across a beach, and there's no need to worry about it coming into contact with the sea because not only is it waterproof, it floats. And it's collapsible enough to make me the happy wanderer or easy-going rambler, but with just enough stiffness and body to distinguish me from the rank amateur and bumbling novice. All in all it seems like the essential head-wear for someone about to spend a month out of doors walking directly into the sun along the narrowing corridor of Britain's south-west peninsula at the tail end of summer. It will be my roof, my camouflage, my wallet and my begging bowl. But more than all that, when I stand in front of the vanity mirror in the shop with the hat on my head, rather than looking like a

seventies Australian cricketer or a weekend ranger at a British safari park, I think I look sort of .. normal. Sold.

The stick was also an impulse, though when I say I 'made it' most of the credit must go to nature itself and the organic processes by which a tiny seed is slowly transformed into solid timber. There's a dank and shady corner at the bottom of my garden, made danker and shadier by the handful of holly trees which grow there and the number of offspring they conceive every year. The shoots grow quickly and plentifully in the understory around the trunks of the parent trees, and earlier this summer I was making the annual cull with a pair of rusty bolt-cutters and felled one particularly straight and surprisingly light sapling, whose circumference sat comfortably within my fingers and palm. I trimmed away a few twigs and sprigs, and the wood itself, once I'd shaved the slimy dark-green bark from the top five or six inches, was antler-coloured and bone-like in texture and shape, as if I'd stripped it of skin and flesh. I even considered whittling ornamental patterns or Celtic designs along its length but decided that might cast me in the role of an over-indigenous man of the hills or New Age rustic walking the spiritual highway of life with his shamanic wand. I left it outside through the big heat of June and July, through Murray's Wimbledon and England's Ashes, imagining I was 'seasoning' it or subjecting it to a traditional and essential maturation process. The exposed 'handle' split a little, and the olive-toned cortex didn't weather or age as I thought it might but by early August I considered that enough time had passed for it to have made the transition from lopped branch to walking stick, and it was coming with me.

The holly is a much mythologised and occasionally maligned tree, but both its reputation and its practical applications suit me very well. Holly is a hard, dense wood. It was once used for making the hammers in harpsichords and in the fashioning of billiard cues, and even though I'm not making a tour of concert halls and snooker clubs I like the idea of the stick as a totem of something rhythmical and melodic, accurate and true. As someone with an unreliable backbone, its rigidity and uprightness also appeal, as does its reputation as a tree which diverts thunderbolts away from houses and humans. Planted on paths and tracks, the tough evergreen acts as a way marker or beacon to the weary and lost, and in past times its branches and arms have proved useful as horse whips and batons. So the stick will be my signpost and my compass needle, and my cattle prod and my nettle slayer, my vaulting pole and my hatstand, and my extra leg and my spine. The holly is also symbolic of winter, and a charm against black magic and the dark arts. The berries, attractive as they appear, are bitter on the tongue and potentially poisonous. In those terms, I'm taking it with me as a piece of the Pennine north, out of season and out of place as I head into that long, low and increasingly treeless coastal region, a representation of who I am and where I'm from. Something of myself.

My dad, never one for getting hung up on the psychosocial significance of material objects but with a keen eye for a comparison, is able to offer an alternative interpretation as I climb out of his car at Wakefield Westgate with the hat on my head and my kit bag in my hand. In previous years that manoeuvre would have produced a waft of pipe smoke which would have followed me onto the platform and halfway to Birmingham. But since he quit there's no sign of the loose tobacco strands or spent matches that once clung to the seats and littered the footwell, no whiff of St Bruno Ready Rubbed, and the ashtray is now full of small coins for the pay-and-display machine. A dedicated and expert smoker from early adolescence, his previous attempts to stop all ended in acrimony and deceit, and in one case farce, when on top of nicotine patches and nicotine gum and electronic cigarettes he was still secretly puffing on his pipe and had taken up cigars. This time, though, it looks like he's stopped for good, cold turkey following a worrying chest infection and the steep

road between his favourite watering hole in the village and his house becoming 'a bit of a pull'. So today the only thing that trails me as I make my way towards the station entrance is the sound of a well-worn Duke Ellington cassette tape rattling through the car stereo. Sixty-five years of pipe smoke might have impaired his lung capacity – he could no more walk the South West Coast Path with me than he could run a marathon – but his ability to deliver a one-liner is undiminished. Through the open window he shouts, 'You've forgotten your staff, Moses.' I retrieve the stick from the boot of the silver Polo, then watch as he performs an illegal U-turn in the busy forecourt and heads for home, waving goodbye with the back of his hand.

Home to Minehead

Tuesday 27 August

Bishops Lydeard is everything we have come to expect from a station on a 'heritage' railway line: overenthusiastic staff in period uniform carrying handkerchief-size flags and buckets of water; milk churns converted to litter bins; wooden signage painted the colour of homely comestibles packaging (Ovaltine, Colman's Mustard, Lyle's Golden Syrup, etc.); destination markers in the shape of pointing fingers; rusting billboards advertising obsolete brands of cigarettes; and a cafe where a large urn hisses and gurgles at the end of the counter and where home-made iced buns are displayed on a cake stand and served on paper doilies. Everything bought in the gift shop, even a 10p postcard, is handed over in a brown paper bag with an old-fashioned till receipt. The small bespectacled face in the booking-office window seems surprised when I ask for a single, even though the return is only a couple of quid extra. I tell him where I'm going, and he replies, 'Well, people have been known to come back from there.' When the train arrives, hooting hysterically and blurring out great plumes of pillowy white steam, I have a whole carriage to myself. It trundles along a single-track line cloistered by overhanging buddleia displaying semi-erect, vulgar purple flowers, then through dark and narrow cuttings, then out into open, rolling farmland with the Quantocks as a backdrop, slowing and halting at Stogumber, Williton and somewhere called Blue Anchor, where bearded porters stride purposefully alongside, blowing whistles and slamming doors. It wouldn't come as a surprise to pull into Adlestrop, or to see Bernard Cribbins on the platform checking his pocket watch. For a line run by enthusiasts and volunteers it's cleaner, less crowded and probably more punctual than most of the rail franchises currently operating across the national network. However, it's not a service you'd want to use if you were in a rush, and I wonder if it's a source of pride or embarrassment for locals that rail access to one of Somerset's principal towns is via a train offering packages such as 'Snowdrops and Steam' or the 'Santa Special'. Type 'Minehead' into the National Rail Enquiries website and the dreaded phrase 'By Bus' appears in the timetable. I pull my bag down from the luggage rack and head for the station exit. And there's no need to ask for directions - it's just a case of following everyone else out of the gates and along the prom, families mainly, some of them arguing with each other after a long journey, wheeling enormous suitcases towards the pinnacled white pavilion on the horizon.



*

The outward appearances are not encouraging. After guest check-in I'm directed towards a place called Strawberry Square in an area labelled Plantation Quay, which seems to be a series of apartments somewhere between Swiss chalet and mock-Tudor in design. The grassy strips separating each structure are scuffed and patchy. Varnish is peeling from the window frames of the buildings. The outside walls of each block are stencilled with large, unequivocal Soviet-style letters. Lots of men are wearing Premier League football shirts with their own surnames printed on the back. In a female voice, an uninterrupted stream of abuse and profanities issues from the open door of a ground-floor flat. Outside each block there's a rusty, Bronx-style fire escape, except it isn't an emergency exit but the exterior metal staircase leading to my second-storey accommodation.

Once across the threshold, though, it's a different vibe altogether, a spotless two-bedroom apartment (one double, one twin), all lemon-smelling and new-looking, with neutral colours on the walls and shiny appliances in the kitchen area. There's a flat-screen telly in the corner of the living room, shampoo in the shower, coffee in the cupboard and a framed photograph of a pebble over the headboard. On the bed there are two soft white flannels and a bath towel expertly folded into the shape of a kneeling elephant. It might not be home but I know I feel comfortable here because ten minutes later I've taken off my watch, put it down on the chest of drawers, and I'm walking around in my bare feet.

*

This isn't my first time at Butlins. In the seventies we bought a family day-pass and spent seven or eight hours on the rides and in the swimming pool. I don't remember the location, possibly

Pwllheli, though I can say with certainty that it wasn't the one in the Bahamas or the one in Mosney, Ireland, which underwent a relatively smooth architectural conversion from holiday destination to government-run centre for refugees and asylum seekers. But I do remember peering through the open door of one of the chalets as we walked past, which was more of a cabin or a manger, with a couple of beds in the room and not much else. And I remember the straggly barbed-wire fence that marked the perimeter, which my dad said wasn't to stop people getting in but to deter escapees. This was at a time when the sites were known as holiday 'camps', a word which brings with it all kinds of unfortunate imagery associated with incarceration or worse. Rebranding and refurbishment has sought to do away with all such connotations. Butlins is now a *resort*, and checkpoints and border crossings are also a thing of the past. Guests are free to come and go through the open gate, as are visitors and townspeople and anyone else with cash to spend. I wandered around for a couple of hours through precincts and arcades, between chain-owned shops and outlets from the Play Fort to Bob the Builder's Yard, then on to the Activity Gardens and Splash Waterworld, then into a 'residential' zone of 'streets' and 'lanes', among two-storey maisonettes, back-to-back terraces, detached bungalows, into Avocet Boulevard, Angelfish Park, Buccaneer's Way, Egret Villas, and transit from one neighbourhood to another without knowing if I've strolled into the posh end of town or onto the wrong side of the tracks. At one stage I find myself in the staff quarters, ranks of distinctly dilapidated barracks beyond the last supermarket, spookily quiet except for a tinny portable radio playing Capital FM next to an off-duty employee with a can of lager in one hand and a roll-up in the other, sunbathing on the pavement.

The dining options at Butlins are just as varied as the types of accommodation and no less stratified, but neither the heaving canteens nor the more exclusive restaurants have me on their lists. 'Are you a guest or a *guest*?' one doorman asks me using a combination of words and air-quotes. After rejection at several establishments I queue up at one of the fast-food counters, then navigate back to my own arrondissement, past kids yo-yoing from a high metal frame on elastic harnesses, past kids bouncing on a huge rubber diaphragm, past an adolescent Goth in full Dracula makeup and Hammer House regalia sulking outside a pub, past men in vests and three-quarter-length shorts, past young lads in gold necklaces and supernaturally white trainers, past young women in denim shorts and white stilettos, and grandparents pushing strollers or holding the hands of toddlers either screaming with excitement or inconsolably tired, and climb the clanging metal stairs and close the door.

*

I had tortured myself with the idea of giving a reading at Butlins, pitting myself against an eighties comedian, ex-game-show host or army sweetheart, requesting a modest venue towards the periphery of the encampment to see if poetry could hold its own against the massed forces of light entertainment. Or I'd wondered about trying to get a gig at the Queen's Hall on the front, sandwiched between the Strand Gift Shop and Merlin's Amusements. After all, poets and the sea are natural companions, for proof of which look no further than Watchet harbour just a few miles down the road, where the agonised and emaciated form of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* stands Christ-like on the harbour with the dead albatross hung around his neck. Our earliest poems were of the ocean – the Anglo-Saxon 'The Seafarer' and 'The Wanderer' – and for well over a thousand years poets of every generation and school have addressed the sea at some stage in their writing life. But poets and the *seaside* seem a less comfortable fit, with the likes of Blackpool or Skegness.

promising a sort of kiss-me-quick thrill that poetry struggles to supply. I've given readings at hundreds of towns and cities across the UK but rarely if ever on the coast itself, the one exception that comes to mind being in Bridlington a few years ago, though the actual venue was the orangery of Sewerby Hall, a former stately home a few furlongs north of the slot machines and the waltzer (We used to go there as kids, even after an alpaca had spat at my mum and my grandma had complained to the zookeeper about a masturbating monkey.) It leads me to wonder if the poetry reading is essentially an inland activity, a notion I'm about to put to the test over the next three weeks.

Here at Butlins all that instant gratification and organised leisure takes place below the stretched tented roof that dominates Minehead's skyline, a giant polytunnel under which fun and enjoyment are hotheaded and forced. So instead of going head-to-head with *A Tribute to the Music of Ollie Murs* in a venue called Reds, or *Storytime with Billy Bear* in the Skyline Pavilion, I've taken a cowardly sidestep and opted for a more literary opening night, a metaphorical home fixture before the tour. I'm collected by Sandra, a local dispensing pharmacist who knows a thing or two about the non-public face of Minehead society but is too professionally discreet to go into detail. We drive east for about half an hour, past the fairy-tale structure of Dunster Castle, with the sea occasionally visible between stands of trees or at the bottom of a valley, then arrive via a narrow lane into Nether Stowey and pull up next to The Ancient Mariner public house, whose many advertised features include 'the largest car park in the area'. No. 35 Lime Street, the tidy-looking cream and olive property on the opposite side of the road, is locked, though eventually a face appears at the window and gestures towards an entrance round the back. This isn't my first visit to Coleridge Cottage. During the early nineties, after reading somewhere else in the county, I was invited by its custodian and resident, Derek Wolfe, to drop by the next day for a personal tour. In truth, there wasn't much to see or to link the house with one of Romanticism's presiding spirits and the place was pretty run down. But Derek was very excited because he'd been exploring in the attic and had discovered a wall which he thought might date back to Coleridge's tenancy. During the nineteen seventies it had been papered over with woodchip, but Derek was hopeful that beneath the modern decoration there might be an original wattle-and-daub partition, and even fantasised that Samuel Taylor himself might have scrawled something on it – a few words, perhaps, or even an undiscovered poem to rival his other great works of the period. We went upstairs with a cloth and a bucket of warm water, and after a few minutes of soaking and wetting Derek asked if I would do him the honour of peeling back the wallpaper. A long strip of it came away with a single pull, and below it, written in felt pen on a sheet of plasterboard, were the words 'Liverpool FC, Gods of Europe'.

Coleridge only lived here for three years but wrote some of his best and best-known poems during that stay. In the absence of any other residence or birthplace the cottage has become a geographical locus to at least counterbalance Wordsworth's Dove Cottage in Grasmere, if not to actually compete with it. Owned by the National Trust, the house underwent a major transformation in 2011 and has been cunningly retro-fitted to late-eighteenth-century standards. A 'resource' as much as a museum, visitors can now dress in period costume, look for pretend mice, sit at the very fireplace where 'Frost at Midnight' was penned, share in some of Sara Coleridge's domestic tasks or write with a quill pen, all under the glow of electrically powered oil lamps and plug-in candles. In the garden, a lawned path curves between pregnant apple trees and carefully chosen wildflowers towards the statue of a pig fashioned from willow rods, replacing the written-off car which languished there for several years. The view beyond is towards where the famous lime-tree bow was said to be located, now a neighbour's bungalow. After lemonade on the terrace, a bit of chit-

chat with a few of the volunteers and accepting an invitation to gaze into a well, I read to a polite audience of thirty-five in the exhibition room at the rear of the main house. It's a featureless, unatmospheric space, but the National Trust's range of glosses and emulsions lend it a veneer of tradition, and it's quiet and calm, even with the door wide open. Birdsong fills the gaps between poems, followed by dusk. Afterwards a man asks me to add to his collection of autographs.

'Have you got many?'

'Not really. You're number four.'

'Who are the other three?'

'Little and Large and Geoff Capes.'

I leave the donations sock draped on the window ledge by the door. It's a saggy old knee-length thing in blue wool, and it lies there flat and deflated like a pathetic and somewhat pessimistic Christmas stocking, while I step outside into the twilight.

*

Suki from Vermont drives me back to camp. We follow the swell and dip of the trunk road along the coast, the lay-bys and verges lined with police vans and more sinister-looking unmarked vehicles, the woods and fields to either side harbouring sharpshooters and marksmen, tonight being the first night of the government-sponsored badger cull and West Somerset one of the pilot areas. Through the trees I watch for the flicker of gunfire, or the iridescent flare of the high-vis jackets the hunt saboteurs are said to be wearing, or even the aura of frizzy silver curls around the head of celebrity protester Brian May, but it's just darkness followed by darkness, enclosing deeper darkness, until Minehead rounds the corner up ahead, the canopied roof of the giant Pleasure Dome throbbing with colour and light.

Minehead to ... Minehead

Wednesday 28 August

I can't face a further interrogation or refusal by a Redcoat, so by 8.30 a.m. I'm eating breakfast in Morrison's cafe on the other side of the dual carriageway – surprisingly similar in tone and décor to Butlins itself. The very chatty woman on the till says she can tell what's on at the holiday resort by which products customers bring to the check-out. Lots of pasta, sausages and garlic bread during the school holidays. Hummus and muesli during the special Christian get-togethers. Rolling tobacco and Rizlas during the All Tomorrow's Parties music festival, and trolleys full of vodka and paracetamol on stag and hen weekenders. I'm not sure how she classifies me with my three brown rolls, slab of Gouda and a tub of Vaseline, but she helpfully points me towards a trading estate across the road in search of a phone charger, after which I wander into Minehead proper to sample the atmosphere and make a few uneducated observations about the place. The first of which concerns a road called The Avenue, which seems to function as an unspoken line of demarcation with Butlins and all who visit there to the east and the town's more permanent residents to the west. Even further west, property values rise in direct correlation to altitude, where pretty lanes climb towards Higher Town under old pine trees and occasional flagpoles. Two towns, in effect, bisected by its main drag, sharing one bay and shoreline. On the beach several people are already stripped down to their waists to catch some early rays, though they sit with their backs to the sea and their deckchairs facing the busy road along the front, because from a sunbathing point of view Minehead is the wrong way round. A bulldozer flattens sand under the promenade. The Avenue itself is a strip of mall of knick-knack and fancy-goods shops, cafes, pubs, bookmakers, pound stores and tattoo parlours, plus the by now familiar sight of a closed-down bookshop, this one with a slurry of unopened letters on the other side of the glass door and just two books lying flat on one of the otherwise empty shelves: a paperback Everyman copy of *Moby Dick* and the 2012 *Top Gear Annual*. I stretch my legs along the criss-crossing paths that lead towards but never reach a place or thing called Beacon, telling myself that this lunchtime saunter and picnic in the woods counts as 'training', then head back to Butlins for a last mosey around the site. My stick I leave propped against the wall in the apartment lobby; as a lone, middle-aged man in a determinedly family environment I already feel self-conscious and conspicuous enough, and wandering around with a four-foot length of holly isn't going to help. Neither would I be confident offering the word 'poet' as an explanation. But with an ice cream in my fist and behind a pair of sunglasses I go completely unnoticed and unchallenged, and if truth be told, now the novelty has worn off I feel relatively comfortable here. In fact that's exactly what's so unsettling about Butlins – not the oddness or peculiarity of the place but its very normality, its ordinariness, the way that standing in the middle of its covered shopping precinct is like standing in the middle of Oldham or Basildon, with the same shops and cafes and bars to choose from and the same brands and products on sale. There's even a church. And a travel agent's, presumably selling more trips to Butlins, but who knows maybe promoting weekend breaks in Rotherham or all-inclusive fortnights in Luton or Tamworth.

because what Butlins offers is a home-from-home experience, a theme-park version of everyday life.

*

West Somerset College near the back of the town has its own public restaurant and therefore its own restaurant manager, or rather a Subject Leader for Hospitality, one Adrian Fleming, who used to teach English before a vacancy came along in the catering department which he stepped into and filled. One day he was teaching contemporary poetry, the next he was explaining the mysteries of a good risotto to Year 10 students embarking on a career in the south-west's all-important tourism industry. Such are the vagaries and flexibilities of the modern educational syllabus, I say to him though I'm not sure if I offer the comment as congratulation or commiseration. No need to feel sorry for Adrian though because he's clearly in his element among the big aluminium pans and stainless-steel knives. Ruddy-cheeked from a recent walking holiday in the Swiss Alps and flushed from the effort of preparing spicy falafels and flatbreads for tonight's guests, he gives me a quick tour of the gleaming catering ovens and spotless fridges and introduces me to some of his star pupils – a would-be chef, an aspiring sommelier, a budding maître d' – before we sit down and discuss the format of the evening. Basically it's up to me, he says. I could go on after the sparkling wine-set-with-agar-agar-served-in-a-champagne-glass starter or between the lamb kebabs and the dessert. 'I don't mind being the cheeseboard,' I hear myself saying. 'Fine with me,' says Adrian, who disappears into the kitchen to do something with a roll of tin foil. About forty people arrive for dinner and take their seats behind the precision-folded napkins and expertly laid cutlery. The PA system is a mic and box-amp arrangement with a timbre more readily associated with bingo calling or high-street busking, but it does the job, and an independent bookshop from Taunton who've set up a stall in the corner do a reasonable trade. The food is delicious and the service faultless. So faultless and so efficient in fact that by half nine we're heading home, back to Adrian's house through the college campus which merges seamlessly in the dark with the grounds of the local hospital. 'Very handy when students chop off their fingers with the meat hatchets,' he says. With his partner Becky we sit on low settees in his living room beneath the arching leaves of an out-of-control pot plant, flanked on one side by a bank of alphabetically arranged DVDs and on the other by a high wall of paperbacks ranging from serious non-fiction to popular fantasy. Adrian has what I think of as the classic chef's appearance: red face, shaved head and a bit of a cheeky grin. He says 'I've cooked for Henley Regatta, the Hilton on Park Lane, the Ryder Cup, Peter Stringfellow Thatcher ...'

'What will your students be doing tomorrow?'

'Tonight's washing up,' he says.

'All part of the training, I guess.'

Adrian nods. 'Exactly. Some of them turn up thinking it's straight to the venison carpaccio or day one and look a bit despondent when I stick a tea towel in their hand.'

*

They're opening a bottle of wine when I head up to bed with a cup of tea. I'm in a back bedroom about the size and shape of the bedroom I had as a boy, which was actually an annexed section of my parents' bedroom, my older sister having sent me packing once we'd become too old for bunk beds. I think Adrian might have tidied up for me, might even have bought new bedding. Everything

looks very crisp and fresh, not to mention very green, from the pale-green walls and curtains to the green patterns on the duvet cover and green sequins on the edge of the pillow case and the green LED numbers on the alarm clock. There's a shelving system cloaked by a dust sheet, with summer shoes stashed in pouches hanging from a rail, like insects in chrysalis, waiting to emerge. My stick leans against the door, its green, reptilian hide camouflaged against the green background, and a larger reptilian presence squats on the floor beside the bed. When I walked the Pennine Way and an inordinately large suitcase travelled alongside me, sherpa'd by kind hosts and organisers who risked vehicle-suspension damage and a hiatus hernia as they lifted and lugged it from stage to stage, the case soon attracting the nickname The Tombstone. This time I've gone for something smaller in the same range, a Russian-doll version of its taller and wider relative, though having no less luggage. The case is just as heavy, a squat and solid block of clothes and books, with every air bubble squeezed from its compacted layers. Lying flat on the carpet the stretched, overstuffed fabric of the lid forms a humped green dome, like the shell of one of those giant sea turtles bobbing around in the ocean or lumbering across a sandy beach, and with just enough phone signal to connect to Google Images I decide that the Galapagos tortoise, with its hemispherical carapace and five hundred pounds of body mass, is the most poetic comparison. I hear their voices underneath me, Adrian and Becky chatting and laughing, talking about grown-up things, and the sound of the telly post-watershed, something with serious music and dramatic pauses. I'm sure I'm older than both of them but in other people's houses I seem to automatically assume the role of the child, the kid in bed surfing through galleries of animal exotica when I should be asleep with the light out. I've been away two days and two nights now and still haven't set off.

Minehead to Porlock Weir

9 MILES

Thursday 29 August

By 9.30 in the morning this is still the case, even though I've been walking for twenty minutes because Adrian's house is a mile or so from the seafront. Also, as well as the rucksack and all the usual items of hiking paraphernalia, I'm carrying what is occasionally referred to as a 'food baby' in the form of a full English breakfast, a foetal agglomeration of pork, egg, beans and potato lying heavily in the bottom of my stomach which might even be twins. 'Do you want the works?' Adrian had asked me once I'd appeared in the kitchen, and seeing the rows of bacon and ranks of sausages already lined up in the grill pan there was only one answer. Pulling on his apron and clapping his hands together, Adrian fried and stirred while I ran my fingers across the books on the kitchen shelves, an eclectic selection of titles ranging from a handsome volume of Nigel Slater recipes to Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*. After chowing through the meal we'd staggered onto the patio at the back for air and rest, and in a photograph taken by Becky the calorific heat haze and cholesterol-generated thermals eddying around our bodies are as good as visible. In that respect, a gentle stroll along the prom before walking in earnest is probably a sensible idea, and rather than grumble about the extra distance I choose to think of this as further training before the actual event, a turn around the paddock before getting out on the course.



The official starting post of the South West Coast Path is marked by Owen Cunningham's metal sculpture at the west end of the seafront, a large silver-grey fabrication which depicts two severed hands opening a folded map of the south-west peninsula, and just to ram the point home the words 'South West Coast Path National Trail' are written on the tarmac in white local-authority-font capitals, with a big acorn painted below and an arrow pointing out of town. Judging by the polished surface of the statue, the fleshy areas between thumbs and index fingers have obviously provided convenient places to lean or sit in the twelve years since it was first installed, and I duly spread myself against the cold metal while Tim takes a photograph and Adrian takes a breather in the form of a quick cigarette. I've known Tim for about twenty years but I didn't know his parents lived in Minehead or that he was a fellow member of the expensive-hat cult. He inflects a Masonic-like nod of approval in the direction of my head and no further words are necessary. As we set off we pass a camper van with a cardboard sign in the windscreen saying, 'Good luck, Simon, see you in Porlock.'

It's cloudy, with the tide out and a damp, warmish breeze blowing in off the sea. The mysterious uninhabited islands of Flat Holm and Steep Holm are visible in the Bristol Channel, though what I think is a third and therefore even more mysterious island turns out to be a moored oil tanker when magnified in Tim's binoculars. The low-lying coastline of Wales comes and goes through the morning mist across a body of pewter-coloured, cold-looking water. The path leaves the old harbour and lifeboat station on the right and passes across a grassed dog-walking zone before entering woods at the far side. What follows is a full-throttle vertical take-off, the track rocketing

heavenwards in a straight line then zigzagging up through the trees, making the lilac and mauve boulders along the coast look like pebbles down below and bringing the blue and pink structures of Hinkley Point nuclear power station into view to the east, and further still, the iconic profile of Glastonbury Tor. The climb is too much for Adrian, who admits to being 'slightly off the pace' and waves us on, but not too much for Wanda, who has walked this stretch on many occasions and seems to have perfected a circular breathing technique allowing her to inhale and talk at the same time. Wanda initially appeared as a small dot about a quarter of a mile behind us with a loud voice shouting, 'Wait, wait,' in a Brummie accent. She arrived huffing and puffing behind a pair of steamed-up glasses and under a helmet of curly blonde hair, apologising for being late and reminding me that I turned down the offer of a night in her static caravan. Her face, now I can see her properly in the strengthening morning light, is stippled with little blisters and sores, as are her ears and the back of her neck, the result of being attacked by a swarm of horseflies a few days ago, she says, something of an occupational hazard in these parts.

'Were you wearing insect repellent?'

'Yes, but they seemed drawn to it,' she says. 'And it's pronounced "Vanda". With a "V".'

'Caravanda!' I say.



But she hasn't heard. I walk behind her up the hill, my ears catching every second or third word of her life story, from her father's experiences in the coal mines of Silesia to her current work-life balance between a house in the Midlands and a campsite on the Somerset coast. After climbing through more oak and beech we break surface on a heath at the top of North Hill, in a landscape of charred and carbonated gorse, the ground underfoot scorched to dust and flaking ash, the weird dead branches and twigs like wiry blackened roots in the air. Half a dozen Exmoor ponies are standing

around a bench at the edge of a car park waiting for biscuits and mints. For someone who's just been hiking in the shadow of the Matterhorn, Adrian appears distinctly unfit; by the time he catches up he looks like he might either expire or explode. And now he's gained this altitude there's no way he's going to squander it for the sake of a few plunging valleys and the smell of the sea. He'll stay on the tops and meet us in Bossington, he says, and sets off along the plateau, between the shrivelled ghosts of gorse bushes and past the yonderly, wind-ruffled horses. The 'rugged alternative route' takes us along the shoulder of the coastline, with views over the Channel broadening and sharpening all the time, then into my first 'combe', Grexy Combe, a perfectly symmetrical steep-sided V-shaped valley with a small stream in the bottom running directly for the coast, towards what looks like a dam wall built of variegated blues and whites and greys, which is the sea, topped by the clouds, topped by the sky. All decidedly non-Pennine in formation, and a reminder that this is new ground for me, a landscape and topography which is textbook British and peculiarly English, but foreign to these eyes and these feet. We watch a couple of peregrines gliding and dipping along the cliff edge, and a sparrow hawk jerking and scything towards a distant copse, then another peregrine which becomes invisible as it lands against a rocky backdrop. Then a raven - the first one I've ever seen beyond the walls of the Tower of London - like a battered old top hat cronking and honking as it allows a convenient updraught to lift it out of the arms of a dead tree and put it down in a far field. In the trough of Henners Combe Tim spots a young red deer, then another two, so red it seems incomprehensible they could find anywhere to hide against the straw-coloured ground or the green bracken. But look away for a second then look again and they've merged into the pattern of the hillside, invisible to us now. It could be that they heard Wanda, who has put her spoken-word autobiography on hold while she enlightens us with snippets of information from her geology night class, starting in the Devonian period of the Palaeozoic era. Or maybe they were spooked by my ringtone, a phone call from a concerned friend who's seen online comments posted by the Western Morning News' Walking Correspondent suggesting that I've gone missing already. We ramble on through colonnades of mountain ash whose berries are so red and vibrant they look like fairy lights or hot, glowing cinders, then into unexpected clumps of oak and birch, bent and knotted trees often in a sheltered crook of the valley or cowering below a stony bluff or clinging to the lee side of the slope. Then through high bracken, along stony walkways and rust-red soil. On the steep descent of Hurlstone Combe a woman on a brown horse is coming towards us, its hoofs clattering and slipping in the fallen scree and loose shale, a brisk and busy Jack Russell nipping between the horse's legs as it trudges up the gradient. 'We call this the north face of the Eiger,' says the woman when we meet. I expect her to be sweating and exhausted, but of course it's the horse doing all the work. She's rather immaculate in a pair of spotless cream jodhpurs and with a neatly braided ponytail hanging down her back. Her black leather Harry Hall boots are so polished I can see my face in the toe end of one, which is about level with my chin. She tells us that her mount answers to the name of Amir and we agree to disagree about the reason chestnuts or 'night eyes' form on the inside of a horse's front legs, those leathery knobblies which are sometimes used as a form of identifying mark or 'fingerprint'. (A vestigial toe, I read later, is the best explanation for this kind of lump. Not the lesion where the animal was once joined to its mother's womb, as Amir's owner believed, and certainly not the result of its knees knocking together when it walks, as I'd suggested, though if I'd carried someone up the north face of the Eiger I'm sure I'd have calluses to compare.) We picnic on the prow of Hurlstone Point, next to the stone-built National Trust collection tin and a sturdy bench, which gives several flying bugs the opportunity of homing in on Wanda's anti-insect spray, Tim the chance to photograph a butterfly and me the challenge of

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