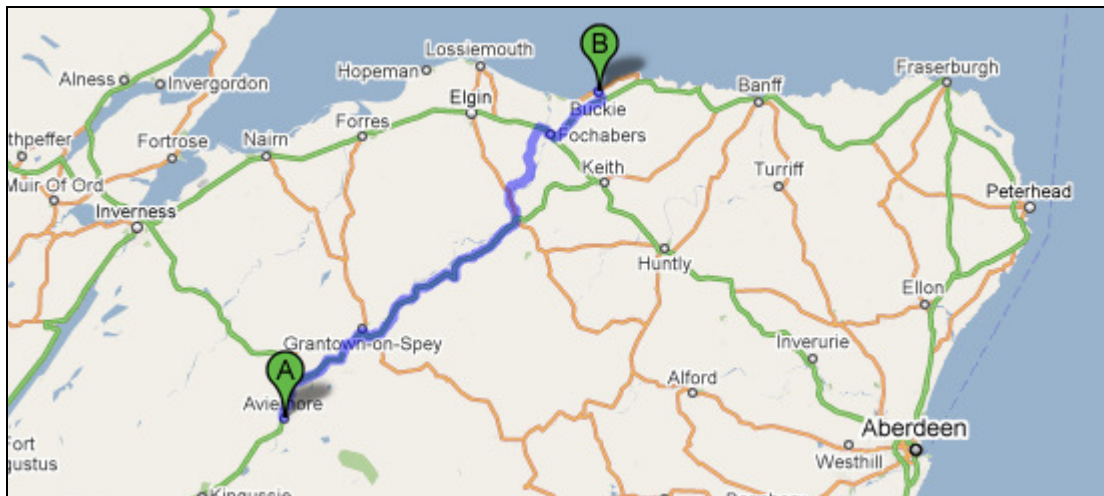


WALK THE SPEYSIDE WAY - APRIL 2010



January 2010: An Idea Is Born

Our story starts as a few texts on a rather boozy Hogmanay night 2009/10....

Ronald, James, myself and our immediate families were all together celebrating the past and toasting the future when I mentioned that my brother-in-law, Ian, and I had discussed walking the 90 mile “West Highland Way” sometime in 2010. This idea was met with great enthusiasm by my drinking buddies, and a few more text messages later it was decided that we would tackle this in our Easter holidays. On hearing what we were about to tackle, our male offspring said that they would also like to take part in this great adventure that we were planning. However, once the drink-laden enthusiasm wore off we decided that due to the younger kids we would tackle the far less challenging 65-mile walk “The Speyside Way”. And so it was set in stone.

We started our training walks with a rather gutsy 8 mile trek one Sunday in early March which, by the time we finished, had our mostly pale complexions a slightly darker shade of scarlet than had been known by most for a good few years. The next training walk was met with a few excuses and not so many of us taking part, but a good 11 mile hike to Turriff by those that could manage that day let us know that we still had feeling in our feet and toes. And so the training continued up until the week before our start date of 4th April, when it was decided that we’d better try walking distances with our back packs on. So back to Turriff to meet up, with everything but the kitchen sink packed in our rucksacks, and off we set. This is where our eyes were really opened up to what lay ahead. The 11 miles that we were comfortably covering in 2½ – 3 hours changed to 4 hours uncomfortably. Time to rethink the utensils and accessories that we were carrying in our backpacks!

The week before we set off saw some rather unseasonal heavy showers of snow (up to 2 feet) in the areas that we were to be walking and, supposedly, camping in. So we were all rather concerned that we were not going to be able to complete, or even start, our adventure. We all started to try to make alternative plans and arrangements, but on the Wednesday night the general consensus was that there was no other time that we could all fit this in due to work, school and other commitments. My brother-in-law and I also decided that we would head up as far as Grantown on Spey the following night to see how bad the weather actually was.

During that day we e-mailed the ranger in charge of “The Speyside Way”, who replied telling us to ignore the horror stories about the weather being covered by the media and that the walk was indeed walk-able. Reassured by the ranger’s comments, Ian and I went off that night expecting to see a light dusting of the white stuff on our chosen path. Well, we didn’t have far to go before our mouths were gawping open. Before we reached Keith there were parts of the road with 12–18 inches of snow piled up at the sides and parts of the road under 6 inches of water. Oh no, what do we do now? However, we continued on our scouting trip and were a bit more encouraged the nearer we got to Aberlour, with what looked like only a couple of inches of snow cover on the parts of the path seen from the road.

We decided that we would take a look in at our proposed campsite at Ballindalloch station to see what the conditions were like for camping there. Again, we saw only a few inches of snow and decided that due to the mild weather forecast between Thursday and Monday night, when we would be camping there, it should be ok. Onwards and upwards to Grantown on Spey, again checking the parts of the path that we could see from the road, and with no further major concerns we took it upon ourselves to make the decision that we were going to start the walk that Sunday as planned.

Saturday 03/04/10: Last Supper

All the families involved met in Aviemore for a “last supper” at an Indian restaurant, where we ate a fabulous meal and the adult walkers had a few last shandys. Just what was required to relax before the big event! We all then went to the youth hostel, where the 10 walkers were staying overnight, and said our goodbyes to our wives and other family members. Then off to bed after a few nips of James’s whisky!!

Day 1, Sunday 04/04/10: Aviemore to Grantown on Spey (~17miles)

Off we went in search of breakfast and, after a hearty “all you can eat” snack and a few Kodak moments, we went in search of the start point of the walk. A mile further on and into Dalfaber housing estate we eventually came upon a kind soul that pointed out that we were in fact a bit off



course. After a minor course adjustment we finally found ourselves on “The Speyside Way” and away we went.

We didn’t have to go far before we were traipsing through 4 inches of snow, but we didn’t mind as just one look around at the absolutely breathtaking scenery, all covered with snow, and the noise of the steam train running alongside the walk between Aviemore and Boat of Garten gave us an insight into what a memorable journey we were about to undertake.

The first stop of the day was when we reached Boat of Garten where we stopped in the community garden for a ½ hour break and discussed all the impressive buildings and surroundings we had just walked past as

we entered the village. On we went and the snow deepened and at some point got wetter and our boots started to feel a little damp on the insides, but no point in moaning about little things like that.

We eventually arrived at Grantown on Spey at approximately 6pm, after completing the last few miles on a path covered in 6 inches of wet slushy snow and with boots that reminded you of fish tanks containing shrivelled toes rather than fish!!! Our saving grace was that we had had the foresight to book into a hotel for that night so at least we would get a good meal, really nice comfortable beds and, most importantly, our boots dried out ready for day 2.

Day 2, Monday 05/04/10: Grantown on Spey to Ballindalloch (~10 miles, or perhaps 16?)

After a hearty breakfast we decided to have a leisurely walk around the town and pick up supplies for the easy day ahead. It was then back to the hotel to pick up our backpacks. We eventually set off at approximately 10am with the intention of being at Ballindalloch to set up our tents at 3pm.

The path between Grantown and Cromdale was again covered in snow, but it did not seem so slushy. We covered the mainly wooded walk in good time and were all in great spirits when we arrived on the outskirts of this tiny village. We were standing reading about the great battle of Cromdale when a farmer passed by with a tractor and slurry tank, which he proceeded to empty in the field next to where we were walking. So the next ¼ mile was maybe the fastest we walked in the whole journey. This was brought to an abrupt stop as we came upon a part of the path where we were up to our knees in snow. We looked for an alternative path, but to no avail, and we proceeded to wade through the snow. If we had known then what was in front of us, I think we would have all thrown the towel in there and then.



As we attempted to pass through the village of Cromdale we were met with a raging torrent of water blocking our path, and so had to detour onto the busy A95 main road to pass this obstacle. Getting off the road and back onto the path as soon as we could was maybe not such a good idea as we were soon either up to our ankles in snow or over the tops of our boots in water. Wet feet again! We crossed the main A95 road again and started the climb up into the Tom An Uird wood where we were met by scenes from the Swiss mountains, with snow up to our knees and blown down trees lying across our path, making the climb that little more challenging. We stopped for our lunch and cooked up some very tasty bacon rolls, sausage, beans and cheesy pasta, but the chill air was beginning to bite, so we packed up and set off again in the hope that the conditions would soon be better. Unfortunately, they would get far worse before getting better.

We crossed through 8 to 10 inches of mud and met a deluge of water running from the hills into the woods of Knock Fink, where the snow level reached up to Matthew's groin. We were beginning to despair at this point and split into two groups to speed us on a bit, as the afternoon turned to night and the wind rose up. The second group decided to head for the main A95 road to miss out the worst of the snow and hopefully make our journey to our campsite a bit easier, whilst the first group followed the path a good bit further before deciding that the main road was their easiest and safest route also. This, in the now dimming light, was not maybe the option we as adults should have been taking with the children, but given our despair at now being some 6 hours behind scheduled arrival at our campsite, it probably saved the search parties being called out for us.

The amount of surface water lying on the A95 posed another problem, as the spray from the cars and lorries drenched us every time they passed. And, despite passing the usually impressive site



of the Tor More Distillery, our heads were down as we knew that we still had another mile and a half to go to reach our destination for the night, Craggenmore House.

Yet we pushed on as fast as we could and eventually reached our accommodation at 9.30pm in total darkness, apart from the dim light of our head torches. The first group of 5, who managed to reach the house approximately 30 minutes beforehand, had already erected 2 of the tents and were working

on the third. The kind lady of the house had agreed with our wives (who had phoned earlier) to take pity, feed us pizzas when we arrived, and to also give bed and breakfast to 5 of us, whilst taking in our wet boots in order to dry them as much as possible. Hence, only the other 5 had to sleep out in the tents.

Pizza and bed – what a perfect end to an absolute nightmare of a day!

Day 3, Tuesday 06/04/2010: Ballendalloch to Aberlour (~10 miles)

After the previous day's exploits we were all awake rather early, which had nothing to do with the geese and cockerels crowing and making noises after the wind finally died down at around 4am!!! The 5 guys that were camping had the tents down and packed away before breakfast time and the 5 that were inside overnight were packed and mostly ready to go too – all keen as mustard after a day that would have had lesser men running for cover. And a welcome bowl of cereal and a plate of bacon and eggs were just what we needed to set us up for another day.

As our friends, George and Myra, had agreed to come up that day to collect the tents and camping equipment, to save us carrying it with us on our onward journey, we also took the opportunity to offload all the “extra weight” that we were carrying in our back packs. So out came the kitchen sink and all the utensils that were weighing us down. Just as we were saying our goodbyes to our hosts and thanking them for their kindness, George and Myra drew up in their car so we helped fill the car as George put on his boots to join in the day's walk.

We were off again! Today would take us past some of the more well known Scottish distilleries, starting with Craggenmore, TamDhu, Carron and Knockandoo, as well as the now unused Imperial distillery, where we stopped for a break and could easily have drifted off to sleep lying on the perfectly kept lawn. We also stopped for a rest and a photo at some of the Great North Railway Line's unused, but well preserved, stations where again you could just let your thoughts drift off to times gone past and imagine the hustle and bustle that once populated these stations and surrounding area. This was more like what we signed up for – a glorious day walking along a disused railway line, with George supplying traditional refreshments every now and then. Now we were walking in style, albeit with plastic bags inside our still soaking boots from the day before.

The path had a few bridges on it, which gave the kids amongst us some great fun trying to make them swing and wobble as much as possible whilst crossing them. And, again, there was some spectacular scenery skirting along Scoot Moore and overlooking the spectacular Spey, rumbling on its course under the single width Blacksboat Bridge. Myra, who left us earlier in the day to have a peaceful time looking around the Aberlour shops, had parked up and started to walk out from Aberlour to meet up with us in order to do the final mile and a half back into town, before George and herself left us to make their way back to Macduff.

We still had to find our quarters for the night, but thanks to Ronald's connections in the fire service, a nice warm fire station awaited us. We were met by Derek, the station officer, and I don't think I have ever met a nicer person. Derek was willing to do anything to help us, going in and out to make sure we had everything we needed and were comfortable. Great guy!

We set off for the chip shop and soon returned with what must have been the quickest disappearing chip suppers ever, followed by some of the big boxes of Walker's biscuits left by Derek. It wasn't long after our nice warm showers that we were feeling tired and ready for bed ... apart from Matthew who would not settle at all and was between fits of wind and the giggles. He was just calming down when we had an unexpected visitor, who just stuck his head round the door to find us all stretched out on the floor and about turned and left, which was met by an outburst of laughter by the 10 gents lying tucked up for the night at 9.30pm.

A really good day!

Day 4, Wednesday 07/04/2010: Aberlour to Fochabers (~15miles)

Bacon butties and dry boots – what a start to the day! We left the fire station and, sadly, some of the fantastic biscuits left for us by one of the station’s crew members, who works at Walker’s of Aberlour. We simply could not fit any more in our rucksacks! We walked back up the main street on a glorious morning to the local shop to stock up on Mars Bars, which had become part of our diet throughout our travels. We crossed through the square and back onto the track and we were off again, albeit short lived. Ben realised he had left his walking pole outside the shop and we had to wait until he ran back for it (maybe we were not all as awake as we looked).

Walking close by to the banks of the Spey towards Craigellachie showed us the sheer volume of water that passes down this mighty river from the hills (and we thought that we had most of the water in our boots). Moving steadily inland, we passed through a rail tunnel where we all practised our male wolf howls, as you do in situations like that. We had a brief stop in Craigellachie before continuing onwards towards Ben Aigan. Walking along, listening to the woodpeckers in the trees and with some spectacular views from Ben Aigan to Rothes and further a field, this was a most enjoyable part of the walk. Again, there were quite a few fallen trees to navigate our way over, under or around on this part of the walk and a bit of snow just for good measure, but we had done all that before and were now pros at this sort of stuff.



Passing Boat ‘O’ Brig we headed uphill, bound for Ordiequish. We thought we had just climbed one of the longest and steepest hills we would encounter on our walk, but no, no, that was to come. Just as Fochabers came into view, the bottom dropped out of the world as we stared into a cavern with, apparently, no bottom. The look on all our faces must have been quite comical. Down we went, all the time thinking about the climb back uphill to come. Yet, surprisingly, the uphill was a bit less strenuous than we were expecting and we emerged from the depths quite fresh in the face and searching for the town we had glimpsed from the other side. Another few miles down the road and we finally came to Fochabers.

We had again been offered accommodation in the fire station, thanks to Ronald’s connections, and headed straight there. We were met by one of the firemen who showed us round and made us feel extremely welcome.

Once settled, it was time for tea and we headed for the chip shop on the main street where we had a fantastic feed. Back in the station that evening, after showering, the youngsters made up a darts and pool tournament league and we all played each other at both, whilst having a few laughs at how hopeless most of us were at these two games. All too soon it was bedtime and we were all contemplating the final day with mixed feelings – glad we would achieve our goal, but sad also that it would be over. Ronald slept in a separate room that night as we had all complained about him snoring the previous night, but we learned he was not the only one, as there were still quite a few noises that night too. He was, perhaps, just the loudest.

Day 5, Thursday 07/04/2010: Fochabers to Buckpool (~12miles)

The day started with more bacon butties, then a walk to the shop to stock up on the essential Mars Bars. We had a special purchase to make that day, on the sly. It was James's 52nd birthday and we would need a cake to celebrate the special event somewhere along the way day. So, as sneakily as we could, a jam sponge, card and candles were purchased and off we went on our final part of the trip.

Walking down through Fochabers, along the newly repaired paths and bridge that were damaged the previous year with flooding passing under the road bridge, we all seemed rather quiet ... could it be said we were actually sad to be near to completing our adventure! This part of our journey took us close along the banks of the raging Spey then off into woodland where we took our first break of the day. Whilst the older members sat and enjoyed the quiet of the woods with a drink and biscuit, the younger members were off to climb some trees. Where did they get the energy?

As we continued towards the Spey mouth we looked forward to our next stop at the Spey Bay visitor centre, where we were to surprise James with his cake. Unfortunately, due to the strong wind blowing in from the coast that day we could not get the candles to light, so we had to improvise and found a sheltered spot where we made a candle pile on top of his sponge. Needless to say, after singing "Happy Birthday" the 10 of us quickly devoured the sponge cake. Note for next year – get a bigger sponge!

Just as we left Spey Bay the rain came on, so on went the jackets and rain covers as we thought we were in for a soaking. Thankfully it never came to much and, half a mile further down the route, we had to stop again to remove all the jackets as we were melting with the heat. The ever-changing Scottish weather!

As we trekked through the woods along the coastal section we were re-routed off the path as part of it was still flooded and damaged from the winter weather. The next few miles seemed to take forever to complete as we were all thinking that the end would be "just round the next bend or over the next hill". I think we were all now looking forward to seeing our family members gathered at the end to meet us.

We came out of the woods and joined onto the old rail track with Buckie in the distance and the sun shining overhead. Not far now. There seemed to be more and more people walking along the paths (more than we had seen on the previous parts that we had travelled) and we were met with some looks of wonder by the passing travellers. "Who is this bunch of scruffy men with these unfortunate children tagging along?" would have been my thoughts if it had been me coming the other way that day.

As we reached the "Buckie" sign posts we could not help but feel very proud of what we had all achieved during the week, especially the young men among us. We continued on towards the finish line at Buckpool harbour, where our welcome party had gathered and we were met by cheers, hugs and kisses from our families. This was a rather emotional part of the trip as on one hand we were so glad it was over, but on the other we would really miss the camaraderie of our walking buddies. So after some gentle persuasion from one certain Granda from the group of well wishers we retired to the "The Star Inn" to plan our next walk.

I don't think any of the adults remember the last part of the journey home in the cars, we were all tired!!!