the 50

BARRY STONE

GREATEST WALKS OF THE WORLD

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barry Stone began his writing career in 1998 as a travel writer before authoring his first book in 2007, *I Want to be Alone*, on the history of hermits and recluses. Nine more titles have followed, and in between books he indulges his passion for walking and taking to trails wherever in the world he finds himself when wearing his travel writer's hat. Barry lives on a quiet acre in Picton, an hour's drive south of Sydney with his wife Yvonne and children Jackson and Truman. He rarely has a day when he is neither writing nor walking.

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INTRODUCTION

Walking, if you want to reduce it to its base mechanics, is little more than a 'controlled fall', a forward movement initiated by the legs, one of which balances us in an upright position before pushing us forward, while the other swings through in a rhythmic motion just in time to prevent us from collapsing flat on our faces. If you believe the best guess of evolutionary biologists it's likely the advent of walking – of becoming bipedal – arose 4–5 million years ago when our ancestors first became providers for family units and so needed to free up their 'hands' in order to bring home food and provisions. At the same time that our heels, hips and knees were becoming enlarged to carry the extra weight required of them, walking on two legs began to free up those same hands for rock-throwing in order both to procure food and prevent the throwers from becoming food themselves. Over time – a *lot* of time – what began as something that was purposeful and survival-driven, a process of natural selection, morphed to become our most efficient mode of travel. From an exo-skeletal point of view running is, by contrast, 75 per cent *less efficient* than walking. Which I guess means apologies are in order to all the joggers out there who think it better to run than walk. Millions of years of trial and error, and the science of human design, say otherwise.

The era of 'recreational walking' – walking for pleasure – was inaugurated in England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries partly as a reaction against increasing industrialisation, partly because the 'Industrial Revolution' brought increased leisure time to an already leisurely aristocracy, and partly nudged along by the Age of Enlightenment. But mostly it was thanks to the era of heroic Romanticism, which lauded the visceral emotive responses born from getting out and confronting the raw beauty of nature, the expressions of which were then being seen everywhere in

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art, music and literature. 'Pedestrianism' – the pastime of watching other people simply walking – became for a time the largest spectator sport in late 19th century America, eclipsing even baseball, which was still in the process of finding its own 'legs'. Walking marathons were so popular they began to take on gladiatorial dimensions when they were extended over so many days they doubled as rather gruesome endurance tests in how not to sleep. How different that is to the 'new pedestrianism' of today advocated by the American urban designer and futurist Michael Arth – redesigning urban spaces where walking and cycle paths take the place of roads, pushing the bitumen and those horrid cars that go with them out to a town's perimeter, thus returning cities to the people.

People who indulge in recreational walking in the 21st century do so for many reasons. Me? Well, the reason I walk is not because I like the physical act of walking so much as because I like the landscapes, gorges, ridgelines and suspension bridges through and over which it takes me. I walk because for me it is reductive – it simplifies life, reduces it to a few core decisions. Turn left. Turn right. Go straight. Keep going. Ignore the weather. Be inventive. Don't look back. I like to walk because it is a slow pursuit, rhythmic and repetitive and purposeful and exhilarating. My feet have taken me to places no other mode of transport could: through the sinewy web of iron and steel that makes up the 52,800 tonnes of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, thankfully now accessible to all who want to climb it and a prime example of how our urban environments are becoming increasingly accessible with every new piece of adapted infrastructure; and along the High Line, an old elevated rail line through New York's meatpacking district, now a triumph of urban renewal *National Geographic* called the 'Miracle above Manhattan'. Whether negotiating the fractured limestone pavements of Ireland's Burren Way, rock scrambling through Utah's Buckskin Gulch, moving over ice floes in the Russian arctic or along the Cornish coast – my mind works best when these places slow it down, when everything you need for the day is on your back and when the promise of a well-grassed campsite, cosy hotel, or B&B is all you need to keep you moving forward.

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When walking I can be the vagabond 'of no fixed address' I've always longed to be, a wanderer who seeks anonymity and passes through landscapes unnoticed, a passive participant in life. I walk because, in words echoed by the French philosopher Frederic Gros, I have 'a need for contemplation'. Contemplative walking is what inspired Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, William Wordsworth and C. S. Lewis. It frees up the mind to find rhythms otherwise suppressed by the demands of everyday life. It problem solves and 'leaves behind', according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'all base and terrestrial sentiments'. Rousseau's mind only worked, he said, when his legs were in motion. Walking may not of itself provide solutions to life's complexities, but it can facilitate them, expose them. Whittle them down into manageable, bite-sized chunks.

There have been times when I've been so immersed in the distractions and random thoughts I've conjured up that I've failed to negotiate the next step. I've had my fair share of walking mishaps. 'Would you like me to carry you?' my guide asked when he saw me struggling down a stepped section of trail on the Kali Ghandaki gorge, the ligaments in my right knee well and truly stretched thanks to a single ill-timed step. Pride, of course, prevented me from accepting his offer. On Italy's Alta Via 1, I slid 30 metres down a snow slope after missing a foot hole while daydreaming, and cannoned into the only protruding rock there was – a fortunate trajectory, it turned out, as it prevented me continuing down the hill a further 100 metres. I've rolled down a slope above a Norwegian fjord, grasping at tussocks of grass to help slow my descent. I've even fallen off a suspension bridge.

The 50 walks in this book represent a cross-section of mountain and cross-country trails, circular loops, and historic and coastal walks that showcase the enviable network of trails that criss-cross the United Kingdom but also include some of the world's classic trails such as the Appalachian Trail and the Tour du Mont Blanc. There are trails here that we should all be a little more familiar with than we are, such as Ireland's Dingle Way and the awe-inspiring Trotternish Ridge on the Isle of Skye, as well as many of the ones we 'think' we know – the

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Pennine Way, the Coast to Coast, and the Cotswold Way.

We live in a modern world in which we are increasingly being 'moved' rather than moving, helped along to wherever it is we want to go by planes, trains, automobiles, electric bicycles, escalators, travelators, segways and hoverboards. Our comforts and conveniences are sapping our strength, and this is no recent phenomenon. Studies at Cambridge University suggest that ever since we gravitated from hunter-gatherers to farmers, our mobility and lower limb strength have been on a gradual decline. Humans, put simply, are past their peak. And urbanisation and a more sedentary lifestyle are to blame.

Now that's not to say that getting out and going for a walk – even a lifetime of very long walks – is going to reverse the effects of the last few thousand post-hunter-gatherer years.

But it's a start.

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THE 50 GREATEST WALKS OF THE WORLD

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50. WHITE HORSE TRAIL

Wiltshire, England

Distance: 144 km
Grade: Easy
Time: 8–9 days

They are scattered right across Great Britain – 57 figures (gigantotomy) and horses (leucippotomy) carved into chalk and limestone hills in areas where their exposed 'whiteness' contrasts well with darker soil or grassy surrounds. There were once many more. Most were created over the last three or four hundred years, not as ancient as their graceful Celtic-like forms might suggest, although Oxfordshire's Uffington White Horse, a masterpiece of minimalist art, dates to the Iron Age or late Bronze Age and was itself the inspiration for other white horse carvings – including the eight examples you can now see as you make your way along Wiltshire's White Horse Trail.

When it comes to white horses, Wiltshire is without doubt the 'county of counties'. Its oldest and largest, set on the site of an even more ancient carving which it completely covers, is Westbury White Horse, cut in 1778 on the boundary of Bratton Downs above the Vale of Pewsey. Westbury White Horse was restored in 1853 and again in 1872, and in 1873 a line of edging stones was added to help keep the chalk in place. Pewsey White Horse, cut on Pewsey Hill in 1937 close to an earlier example dating from the late 1700s which scholars think may have included a rider, was designed and cut to honour the coronation of George VI. The Alton Barnes White Horse on Milk Hill appeared in 1812, and in 1804 students at a school in Preshute designed the 'tiny' (19 m nose to tail) Preshute, or Marlborough, White Horse. The Winterbourne Bassett White Horse was likely cut in 1838 by Henry Eatwell, the Parish Clerk of Broad Hinton, most likely to commemorate the coronation of Queen Victoria. Broad Town White Horse, visible from the village of Broad Town, probably dates to 1863/64 when it was cut by a local farmer, William Simmonds,

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or could be older if the claims of a curator at the Imperial War Museum that he scoured it with a friend in 1813 are to be believed. Cherhill White Horse, Wiltshire's second oldest (1780) and second largest (43 m ear to hoof), sits below the Iron Age ruins of Oldbury Castle. The county's youngest figure, the Devizes White Horse just north of the town of Devizes on Roundway Hill, cut in 1999 to usher in the new millennium, was based on the design of the now barely visible Snob's White Horse (1845), a figure that has defied several attempts to have it re-cut and is therefore not counted in the list of horses the trail aids you in discovering.

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The White Horse Trail takes you to each horse in turn through the lovely rolling hills of central Wiltshire's chalk downs, and while you are certainly welcome to walk the trail in its entirety, each horse has its own approach trail so it is

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possible to pick and choose which particular horses you'd most like to see. Driving to each horse and walking the trails to their individual viewing points is of course an option, but for those who have a week or more to spare and plan to walk the trail in its entirety, a good starting point is the car park above the Westbury White Horse that skirts a firing range on Salisbury Plain. From Westbury, metalled roads, bridleways, farm tracks, bogs, sleeper bridges and rutted tracks can then get you the 38 km or so via Redhorn Hill to Pewsey, but Westbury's remoteness from the remaining white horses makes this the one section you're probably going to want to drive.

The 18 km from Pewsey White Horse to Marlborough White Horse outside Preshute begins with a lovely walk through uncultivated fields into Pewsey and briefly along the Kennet and Avon Canal towpath. From there continue on to the Mid-Wilts Way (MWW), a lovely rural walk in its own right that runs for 109 km from Ham near Inkpen to Mere, not far from Warminster. Join the Wansdyke Path (more on this wonderful path shortly) on the edge of West Woods, pass through Short Oak Copse and make for Preshute House in Marlborough College, where the Marlborough White Horse can be seen behind the college's tennis courts, sitting in its shallow slope on Granham Hill.

Just 10 km away is Winterbourne Bassett White Horse, reached via Totterdown Wood and along the Ridgeway, long considered Britain's oldest road. The 10-km trail to Broad Town and the Broad Town White Horse begins on the Ridgeway, takes a route through the grounds of Bincknoll Castle and neighbouring Bincknoll Wood, and ends with a trail through brambles, thistles and nettles that may or may not be open to the public thanks to landslips and the path being overgrown, though the alternative approach via Horns Lane and Chapel Lane into Broad Town is easy enough.

The 12.5 km to Cherhill White Horse starts with the crossing of a succession of fields and farm gates until you reach the hamlets of Clevancy and Highway, beyond which you'll have your first sighting of Cherhill's Lansdowne Monument, a 38-m-high obelisk erected by the 3rd Marquis of

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Lansdowne to commemorate his ancestor William Petty – scientist, philosopher, and charter member of the Royal Society. The Cherhill White Horse is a ten-minute walk from the monument on the hillside below, on a slope so steep that after it was cut children from Cherhill would slide down the figure on sacks and trays. A major renovation was conducted in 2002 which involved re-cutting the horse's outline and resurfacing it with more than 160 tons of fresh chalk.

From Cherhill it is 15 km to Alton Barnes White Horse, an historic treasure-trove of a walk that has you briefly treading an old Roman road before joining up again with the Wansdyke Path, which here follows as best it can a long ditch and embankment dating to the Dark Ages (400 to 700 CE). Constructed by persons unknown on an east-west alignment, the Wansdyke ditch is one of the UK's largest (and least-known) linear earthworks.

Passing more farm tracks, kissing gates and barns you leave the Wansdyke Path and enter Pewsey Downs Nature Reserve, famous not only for the Alton Barnes White Horse which now lies before you on Milk Hill, but also as a Special Area of Conservation in what is a classic chalk down habitat with its early gentians and an orchid-rich grassland that includes a proliferation of burnt-tip and frog orchids that help support the reserve's impressive butterfly population. The Alton Barnes White Horse underwent a significant restoration in 2010 when 150 tons of fresh chalk was helicoptered to the site where volunteers then got to work on giving the figure a much-needed facelift.

The 19-km walk to Devizes starts with a visit to Adam's Grave, a Neolithic long barrow on the summit of Walker's Hill that was opened in 1860 by ethnologist and archaeologist John Thurnam who found several incomplete skeletons and a leaf-shaped spearhead inside. A delightful 11-km walk along the Kennet and Avon Canal towpath through the villages of All Cannings and Horton leads to the gorgeous tree-lined avenue of Quakers Walk before a series of hedges, tarmac roads and a wooden kissing gate brings you to the Devizes Millennium White Horse. Designed in 1999 by a former pupil of Devizes Grammar School, Peter Greed, and the only white horse in

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Wiltshire to face to the right, it was executed by more than 200 enthusiastic locals and now forms the logo of the Devizes Nursteed Primary School.

Sadly, not all of Wiltshire’s white horses have survived. The Rockley White Horse, discovered on Rockley Down in 1948 when the ground above it was ploughed, was lost when the chalk was dispersed, while a horse at Ham Hill cut in the 1860s was lost long ago as it was just an excavated shape with no chalk infill.

The White Horse Trail is an undemanding, gentle walk through a peaceful part of southern England that is filled with history and mysticism. It gets you close to prehistoric Avebury and Silbury Hill, part of the Stonehenge, Avebury and Associated Sites UNESCO World Heritage Site, and includes tantalising glimpses on to some fabulous trails including the Wansdyke, the Ridgeway, and sections of the Kennet and Avon Canal towpath.

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49. MONMOUTHSHIRE AND BRECON CANALS

Monmouthshire / Powys, Wales

Distance: 51.5 km
Grade: Easy
Time: 2–3 days

It's a mouthful, isn't it, having to say Monmouthshire and Brecon canals all the time, which is why those who work on it every day prefer to call it, simply, the 'Mon and Brec'. But it wasn't always the single waterway it is today. It began its life as two canals: the Monmouthshire Canal, authorised by an Act of Parliament in 1792 with its main line from Newport to Pontnewynydd (20 km long, 42 locks, rising 136.3 m) opening in 1796 and its Crumlin Arm (18 km, 32 locks, rising 109 m) following in 1799. The other canal, the Brecknock and Abergavenny Canal, was opened in stages from 1797 to 1799 and was originally meant to join with the River Usk near Caerleon but instead was linked to the Monmouthshire Canal at Pontypool.

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Photo: Greg Willis

The canals, built by Navigators (Navvies) to transport iron, coal, stone and processed lime, began declining in profitability in the mid-1800s with the arrival of the railways, and sections routinely began to be abandoned. Commercial traffic ceased

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in 1933, and in 1962 they closed altogether. Restoration work to convert the canals to recreational waterways, however, soon commenced under the auspices of the newly formed British Waterways, with work on Brynich Lock near Brecon in 1968. After suffering all of the usual ravages associated with more than a century of decline, the canal reopened from Pontypool to Brecon in 1970. It has since evolved into one of the most spectacular and scenic canals to be found anywhere in Great Britain.

Walking (or mountain biking) its towpath, almost all of which passes through Brecon Beacons National Park, is a delight as it winds its way from Brecon to Pontypool past farmlands and woodlands, hugging mountain slopes above the valley of the River Usk. Not being connected to the broader network of British canals means there is far less boat traffic on its slow waters which makes for a quieter, more intimate experience than one generally has on a British canal. The wildlife here is particularly impressive too, with the valley's blanket of wildflowers and the canal being a magnet for birds such as kingfishers, herons, moorhens, swans and mallards. There are also several additional trails you can pick up along the way, like the Henry Vaughan Walk, named in honour of the well-known 17th-century poet that begins in the village of Talybont-on-Usk.

The walk proper, however, begins in Brecon and from Brecon Basin it's about 4 km to the first lock at Brynich and from there to the five locks at Llangynidr – these come as something of a surprise on this canal which is a contour canal, meaning banks of locks are a rarity. The next 37 km to Pontymoile are lock-free – an impressive accomplishment in itself considering the contours of the hills – and often wind under gorgeous canopies of overhanging trees and pass through towns such as Pencelli, Talybont with its abovementioned Henry Vaughan Walk and Crickhowell, with its Iron Age and Norman remains as well as the spectacular arched bridge over the River Usk, built in 1706 and added to in 1828–30 with thirteen arches on its upstream side, yet only twelve on its downstream!

Gilwern, once a hub of 19th-century industry, is next, with

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its old tramroads leading to 19th-century limestone quarries and yet more trail diversions, this time taking us to the open moorlands of Llangattock mountain, an undulating plateau that rises to a height of 530 m and formed from coarse sandstones and pockmarked by shakeholes – sinkholes caused by percolating groundwater.

On a canal with a wealth of historic sites, one that should not be missed is Goytre Wharf with its wonderfully preserved lime kilns. At the time of the restoration of the canal in the 1960s Goytre Wharf existed only as a moorage for a few local boats and a boat hire company. It still has its moorage basin, but now the range of vessels is far more eclectic since undergoing its own detailed restoration in 2000.

Walking the canal is more a stroll than a walk. Its industrial history slows you down, but so do its more basic diversions. There is the Royal Oak Pub in Pencelli, the Tipple ‘n’ Tiffin cafe at Brecon’s Theatr Brycheiniog, The White Hart Inn and The Star Inn in Talybont, and the lovely cafe and restaurant at Goytre Wharf. The waterway that was once an industrial corridor bringing raw materials from surrounding quarries along horse-drawn tramroads, incorporating aqueducts over Brynich and Gilwern and the 343-m Ashford Tunnel, is now a canal system built for walking, cycling, canoeing and boating, a delightful reinvention of one of Britain’s most isolated – and idyllic – canal systems.

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48. LLANGOLLEN ROUND

Denbighshire, Wales

Distance: 53 km
Grade: Easy to Moderate
Time: 2–4 days

They call it the 'Permanent Challenge' – to conquer in a single day the summits surrounding the beautiful Vale of Llangollen on the fully waymarked, high-level 53-km Llangollen Round on the Welsh borders. All you have to do is rise early, have breakfast, and make your way to the Tyn Dwr Outdoor Centre where there will be someone to stamp your route card, give you your Permanent Challenge pack, and take a note of your time. Then off you go, either clockwise or anti-clockwise until you reach the half-way point at the Ponderosa Cafe on Horseshoe Pass, where you collect your next stamp. Then it's a walk/dash to the finish line back at Tyn Dwr where your time is again noted and you receive your personalised certificate that shows your time and the distance covered. And no matter how exhausted you feel at the end of all this you'll be glad you did it, because you've just completed in a day what most people take three or four to do. Plus your fee of six pounds for the privilege of doing it in a day will be going to Cancer Research UK, the Llangollen branch of which was responsible for devising the route.

Of course there's nothing to prevent you from making a contribution to CRUK and then doing it in four days anyway, and plenty of reasons why you should not, the least of which is the lovely mix of limestone grasslands, open heather moorlands, and woodlands both deciduous and coniferous that makes walking here such a delight and something to linger over. And for those who are navigationally challenged the trail is a peach – your starting point of Llangollen is almost always visible as you circle it in the hills above.

Most who take the four-day option begin in Llangollen, the attractive market town on the River Dee famous for its annual

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Eisteddfod and for Chirk Castle, constructed between 1295 and 1310 to keep the Welsh under English rule. The River Dee is crossed twice on the trail: once via the lovely 1660 Carrog Bridge in Carrog, the last stop on the popular Llangollen Steam Railway line; and once courtesy of the magnificent Pontcysyllte Aqueduct, the 307-m-long 'stream in the sky'. Completed in 1805 using local stone, and a World Heritage Site since 2009, Pontcysyllte is Britain's longest and highest (38 m) aqueduct with eighteen piers, nineteen arches, and is fed by the waters of nearby Horseshoe Falls. While it is a part of the official trail, there is also a ground-hugging alternative for those who would prefer not to cross it.

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Photo: Roger W Haworth

The views along the trail are not to be trifled with – Snowdon and the mountain vistas of northern Wales, the Mersey estuary, the Cheshire Plain, the limestone escarpment of Wenlock Edge with its well-preserved woodlands tumbling

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down its steep slopes, the Shropshire Hills, and of course the Dee Valley. There's even an Iron Age fort on Llantysilio Mountain (Moel y Gaer – Welsh for 'Bald Hill of the Fortress'), with its single rampart and segmented ditch.

The trail is divided into six segments of varying lengths, determined by their proximity to road and rail connections. Unless you intend pitching a tent it's best to walk a segment and return to Llangollen that evening, before setting out on the next segment the following day. There is a regular bus service out of Llangollen to points on the trail. Ascents and descents are generally fairly gentle, the exception being an 11.4-km stretch that takes in several summits in quick succession over a variety of terrain, including a brief walk over shingles, though no scrambling is required.

Once back in Llangollen if you still have some walking left in you, you can tackle the Llangollen History Trail, a 9.5-km walk that begins in town on Castle Street and takes you to the Llangollen Canal, opened in 1805 to carry slate from surrounding quarries to England's burgeoning cities. A 3-km walk on its towpath goes to Horseshoe Falls, a semicircular weir designed by Thomas Telford to divert water to the nearby Shropshire Union Canal. The trail also includes Llantysilio church, originally a 13th-century chapel that was enlarged in 1869, the ruins of Valle Crucis Abbey, founded by Cistercian monks in 1201 and once Wales's richest abbey after Tintern, and finally the picturesque ruins of Dinas Bran Castle, abandoned in 1282. Which amounts to a lot of history, both built and natural, for one very small valley.

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47. KEENAGH LOOP WALK

County Mayo, Ireland

Distance: 12 km
Grade: Moderate
Time: 4 hours

This lovely loop in Ireland's County Mayo packs a lot into what is a fairly compact trail – panoramic mountain views, clear-running streams and rivers, and a beautiful valley – all set in a wilderness of ethereal blanket bogs, Ireland's most celebrated type of peatland with a peat substrate that can range in depth from 2 to 7 m underneath a grassy surface of pools, flushes and swallow holes. Here you are in the midst of what could be called Ireland's 'blanket bog coast', a world of low-lying coastal plains which extend through Donegal and Galway – rich wetlands that contain more than 90 per cent water and are in fact vast water reservoirs that support a rich degree of biodiversity including plants, birds, invertebrates and mosses. There are even prehistoric farming landscapes and artefacts hidden beneath in its peat-filled depths. No wonder, then, that those who know better become upset when areas like this are unfairly maligned and referred to as 'wastelands'.

The Keenagh Loop Walk begins at Bellanaderg Bridge, 20 km outside the town of Castlebar, and crosses the Boghadoon River where you follow an old road towards Newport before branching off at a three-way junction and through Derreen. Next, head south/southwest on a broad, grass-covered track that takes you up over the eastern shoulder of Letterkeeghaun. Continue on the grassy trail for 3 km past a concrete water tower and the edge of a forest where the trail then bears to the right and takes you over a large expanse of typically boggy ground until you reach a small river. There are waterfalls to admire here as you follow a river for 1 km or so towards the remote and spectacular Glendorragha Valley. As you make your way through the valley keep on the lookout for a line of old timber fence posts, and when you reach them turn

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right and prepare yourself for a little bit of climbing as you ascend along a small tributary of the river you've been tracing for a 1-km-long slog up to a mountain pass below Knockaffertag, although the climb is a gentle one. After conquering the pass you then descend via an old sheep track on a north/northwest line down past some abandoned farmhouses to a small farm track and on to a small road which takes you back to your starting point.

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Photo: Ben Brooksbank

Walking the Keenagh Loop is an overwhelmingly peaceful, serene experience. This is a genuine wilderness, with what seems like an ocean of grass around you, while peaks like Croagh Patrick far off on the horizon present a haunting vista

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The trail then descends to sea level along a windswept hillside before passing by a roughly dressed sandstone three-storied tower house – all that remains of the mid-16th-century Minard Castle, made uninhabitable by the severe damage inflicted on it by Cromwellian forces in 1650. Narrow, unpaved and rural roads and secondary roads snake their way through farmlands to the west (don't accidentally wander on to the Tom Crean Trail, a common error) and continue to Lispole with its breathtaking views of Croaghskearda (1,995 ft) and An Cnapan Mor (2,129 ft) before some often marshy farmland trails could see you slipping on your gaiters as you approach Dingle.

Leaving Dingle the trail runs along a beach for the first time at Ventry Harbour, and then the views really open up as you head off on a green road known as Bothar Dorcha (the Dark Road) around Mount Eagle, past Iron Age promontory forts and a multitude of beehive huts, and then get your first glimpses of the lovely Blasket Islands, inhabited until 1953 by an Irish-speaking population who lived in primitive cottages and whose language was the focus of several linguistic studies. Their descendants now live on the Dingle Peninsula, and it is possible to visit Great Blasket Island, the largest in the group, by ferry out of Dunquin Harbour which lies ahead of you – a fascinating side-trip worth factoring in to your itinerary. Out of Dunquin, grassy fields lead to picturesque Clogher Beach and then, after leaving Smerwick Harbour, you'll follow a very impressive 6-km stretch of shore that doesn't end until you reach Ballydavid. This is the centre of an area of uncommercialised local culture that remains uncrowded even during peak summer months when impromptu music sessions by local musicians can occur at any time. There is also a network of excellent local walks here including a section of the Saint's Road and other trails to various archaeological sites.

Brandon Mountain is now looming as the Ballydavid cliffs obscure the ocean to your left, a fact that only serves to increase your focus on the challenge to come. The mountain, at 3,123 ft, is Ireland's second highest and scaling it provides wonderful views back to the Three Sisters, a line of peaks that were the first landfall sighted by Charles Lindbergh at 10.52am

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on 21 May 1927 on his history-making transatlantic flight. Hiking Brandon Mountain, however, can be a real slog on the way up – a 2,000-ft ascent – particularly if the weather turns nasty, and can be downright dangerous on the way down, making the village of Brandon at the foot of the mountain on the shoreline of Brandon Bay seem a veritable oasis. Brandon is also a *Gaeltacht* village, meaning a place where the Irish language is the dominant vernacular.

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From Brandon the trail leads to the village of Clogham on an undulating road inland before returning to the sea at Fermoyle, where it joins with the 14 km of Fermoyle Strand, Ireland's longest beach, before following Scraggane Bay and

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on into the town of Castlegregory at the end of a small peninsula separating Brandon and Tralee Bays. From Castlegregory you negotiate a flat expanse of bogland before joining the main road into Camp, thus completing the Dingle 'loop', and from there you can follow the Tralee Ship Canal back to Tralee.

The Dingle Way is a coastal walk between sea and mountains. Farms are no-go areas, and where they occur walking is reduced to roads, beaches, or around the margins of heathlands. Mostly there is no right of way. But everywhere you go there is the backdrop of its gloriously glaciated interior mountains, and wherever you look there is colour: fuchsias, honeysuckle, bramble blossoms, emerald-green hills and deep-blue water. There are 4,000- year-old standing stones, ogham stones and beehive huts – more than 2,000 monuments at last count – set amidst an ever-changing light that illuminates this mountainous finger of land that has been home to human beings for more than 6,000 years.

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45. FORMARTINE AND BUCHAN WAY

Aberdeenshire, Scotland

Distance: 64 km Dyce to Fraserburgh; 21 km spur Maud to Peterhead
Grade: Easy
Time: 4 days

The first stretches of the Formartine and Buchan rail line were laid through the farmlands north of Aberdeen in 1861, when a 29-mile section was built linking Dyce with the town of Mintlaw so that local farmers could more efficiently get their produce and livestock to market. The line proved so popular that the following year a 13-mile extension was opened to Peterhead – a port town since the 16th century and the easternmost point of mainland Scotland – and in 1865 a further section was laid to Fraserburgh on the Buchan Coast. The lines would continue to serve the farming communities and fishing ports north of Aberdeen until the 1960s, when Richard Beeching, the chairman of British Railways, in an age of increasing competition from road transport, wrote two landmark reports targeting over 2,300 stations and 5,000 miles of rail lines for closure. Not all of his suggestions were implemented, but most were, including the Peterhead and Fraserburgh lines, although both continued to carry freight into the 1970s. Beeching always insisted it was 'surgery, not mad chopping', but the fact is that the Scottish rail network was cut asunder by what came to be known as the 'Beeching Axe'. And it would never be the same again.

What was bad news for rail transport, however, proved to be, in time, very good news for walkers, especially those who prefer a flat, easy ramble to energy-sapping ascents. And that is why rail line conversions hold such enormous appeal. There were limits to the climbing capacity of steam locomotives. When gradients are too steep, wheels 'spin' on the track due to insufficient adhesion. So you know that an old railway line isn't going to harbour any real ups or downs. The walking is

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Formartine. Passing under a bridge at Ward Head and through another cutting the views now extend over broad, rich farmlands and on to the lovely old Mill of Elrick which, though now minus its water wheel, still presents a lovely picture with its original stone buildings. A couple of muddy farm tracks are crossed and there's a patch of woodland plantation called – somewhat optimistically – the Grampian Forest, but otherwise you continue into Maud, and then there's a choice you need to make: either go via Strichen north to Fraserburgh, or to Longside and east to Peterhead.

If Fraserburgh is your goal you can get there in a day, but stock up supplies in Strichen first as there's nothing ahead of you in the way of shops. Before you leave Strichen, allow time to visit the Strichen Stone Circle, a megalithic stone circle destroyed in 1830 and reconstructed in 1960. The trail north of Strichen doubles these days as a farm track used by local farmers. A loch near Newton Wood makes a good rest stop, and overlooking Strichen is the Mormond Hill White Horse, thought to have been cut in the late 1790s by a local officer whose horse was shot out from under him in a battle with the Dutch in 1794. A series of platforms, bridges and linesman's huts are passed and then Fraserburgh Bay and its bustling working harbour – Europe's largest shellfish port – finally comes into view.

Should Peterhead be your destination, you will head out to Bridgend, then past the crumbling walls that are all that remain of the Cistercian monastery of Deer Abbey, founded in 1219. If so inclined and not pressed for time you can take a detour into the charming town of Old Deer, with its main street – Abbey Street – a lovely blend of 18th- and 19th-century buildings. Back on the Way you go through woodlands and down the centre of Mintlaw before an expanse of wide, flat farmland – with the old rail line, your unmistakable guide, all but disappearing in a straight line ahead of you – takes you into Peterhead.

The Formartine and Buchan Way not only provides a rural retreat for walkers – as well as containing many sections that are wheelchair accessible – it has also become an important corridor for wildlife including foxes, deer, badgers, weasels,

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partridges and pheasant. It links secluded forests and marshlands, and continues to breathe new life into a tiny and easily overlooked corner of rural Scotland.

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44. COTSWOLD WAY

Gloucestershire, Somerset, England

Distance: 164 km
Grade: Moderate
Time: 8–10 days

The Cotswolds, as those who are aware will be only too happy to tell you, are not, in fact, hills. They are an escarpment – the Cotswold Edge – a line of high country almost 160 km in length that runs from England's southwest up to its midlands. Like escarpments everywhere it is a region of tilted rock – on one side a gentle slope eastwards towards the Oxfordshire Plain and the Thames Valley, while on the other side a far more pronounced and abrupt westward slope down to the plain of the Severn Valley. Composed of oolitic limestone laid down 150 million years ago this rock, composed of small, round grains, is not white like limestone tends to be but is instead a lovely ethereal pale gold; easily split and delightfully weather-resistant, it hardens over time. So why does this matter? Because you see it everywhere here, not just in the ground but in many of the buildings you pass on the Cotswold Way in villages that are the equal in beauty of any in England – places like Chipping Campden, Stanton, Broadway and Stanway – villages capable of ruining itineraries because you can't drag yourself away from them. Golden coloured vignettes that flicker in a golden-hued landscape. 'As if they know the trick', wrote J. B. Priestley, 'of keeping the lost sunlight of centuries glimmering about them'.

Inaugurated as a national trail in April 2007 after first being mooted by the Rambler's Association in the 1950s, the Cotswold Way runs northeast out of Bath and is a trail of ups and downs as it meanders along the western rim of the scarp, providing glimpses of market towns far below and then heading down to them on switchbacks through a world of wild roses, drystone walls and fields of bluebells, with kestrels above and cropped turf below. You can walk it north-south or

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south-north – both are equally well signed – though the going is a tad more 'inclined' for the northbound walker. Walking north, however, means the very best of the Cotswolds will be waiting for you as a sort of 'grand finale'.

Leaving Bath, the first segment of the Cotswold Way is a long day's walk to Old Sodbury, just below and to the west of the escarpment, and already you're being seduced by the scent of wild garlic and the playful shadows cast by beech woodlands. At Penn Hill just beyond Weston (once a separate village to Bath, now swallowed up by it) and Kelston Round Hill (714 ft) the views really begin to open up and hint at the broad panoramas to come: the Severn Estuary and the Severn Bridges, the Black Mountains of southeast Wales, May Hill on the Gloucestershire/Herefordshire border, the jagged Malvern Hills, the Vale of Evesham, and Cleeve Hill.

But it's the villages and towns along the way – and some off the way you really need to see, like Cheltenham – that make this walk what it is, a concentration of natural and built history few English trails can match. There is Wotton-under-Edge, tucked beneath the edge of the escarpment with Nibley Hill over it; the old textile mills of Stroud; gorgeous Snowshill with its ancient cottages, 19th-century church and village green set in the hills above Broadway; and there is Broadway itself, with its chestnut trees and wisteria-draped cottages built of limestone that is positively yellow. While in Broadway you also need to make the ascent to Broadway Tower, a folly completed in 1798, a place of inspiration for William Morris, the founder of the Arts and Crafts architectural style, and a high point from which the views – some say into sixteen counties – would be difficult to exaggerate. Finally the trail comes to an end in Chipping Campden, a wool trading centre in the Middle Ages now with a gorgeous High Street of terraced 14th- to 17th-century buildings and without doubt the Cotswold's most elegant town.

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Photo: Rwendland

You can bring a tent here if you want, but camping facilities are somewhat scarce though some B&Bs do allow it with prior permission. Much better, though, to rest in comfort so as not to allow aching limbs to distract you from the beauty around you

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Presuming you choose the anti-clockwise option there are four stages to your journey: Aysgarth to Hawes (21 km), Hawes to Keld (21 km), Keld to Grinton (23 km), and Grinton to Aysgarth Falls (20 km). From Aysgarth you follow the River Ure past the Aysgarth Falls and through farmland to the 14th-century Bolton Castle, a wonderful example of a quadrangular castle which was a temporary home/refuge to Mary, Queen of Scots after she fled Scotland in the aftermath of the Battle of Langside. A steep climb over open moorland then takes you to Apedale and Apedale Head, a rather desolate former mining area. A track over expanses of heather skirts Grinton Hill before descending into the town of Grinton, known locally as the 'Cathedral of the Dales' because its St Andrew's Church, largely a 15th-century rebuild over earlier 12th- and 14th-century remains, was the only church serving all of upper Swaledale for hundreds of years. (Note for Herriot fans: this is the church that was featured in the *All Creatures Great and Small* episode 'Brotherly Love').

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Photo: Joe King

A long distance, fully waymarked trail that takes you through the mountains from Shankill west to Tallaght and with a total ascent of around 1,100 m, the trail begins in Brady's Pub in the heart of Shankill village (well ok, the trail actually

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begins on the main street beside Brady's Pub, but why split hairs?) and continues through the suburbs (don't worry, the views are coming) to Rathmichael and the Rathmichael Cross, once a marker between two 12th-century churches and one of many so-called Fassaroe Crosses, unusual in that it depicts a crucifixion scene on both its faces. From there you enter Rathmichael Wood, a mixed coniferous and broadleaf woodland which opens up to lovely views across to Bray Head. The trail then skirts Carrickgollogan Wood, and it's well worth the climb to its 276-m summit, from where you'll be able to see the Lead Mine Chimney Flue, once a part of the Ballycorus Lead Mine which operated from 1807 to 1913, with its distinctive external stone spiral staircase, the only one of its kind in Ireland. For a close-up view of the tower you can take the 2-km detour on the Lead Mines Way.

Now you make your way via Barnaslingan Wood to Barnaslingan Hill (781 ft) and its view over The Scalp, a narrow glacial valley formed during the last Ice Age and a designated Area of Special Scientific Interest. Emerging on to Enniskerry Road the trail parallels the R117 into the small village of Kilternan, after which you take the R116 and begin the climb up to Glencullen, one of Ireland's highest-altitude villages, where you'll find Johnnie Fox's Pub, which also claims to be the country's highest pub – though this is disputed by various other high-altitude establishments. The pub has an interesting history though, and was used as a meeting place by members of the 1916 Rebellion. Outside of town on the slope of Three Rock Mountain the trail passes by a Bronze Age (c. 1,700 BCE) wedge tomb excavated in the 1940s and known locally as the 'giant's grave'.

More road walking, this time along Ballyedmonduff Road up to Ticknock Forest and the summit of Three Rock Mountain and on to Two Rock Mountain, the trail's high point at 1,759 ft where you'll find the remains of a Neolithic passage grave. A ridge walk to Tibradden Mountain (1,532 ft) then descends through a forest of oak, beech, Scots pine and Sitka spruce before passing along the north slope of Cruagh Mountain and down a series of minor roads into the Glenasmole Valley, a lovely slender gorge, home to green-winged and small-white

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