

## The 100 Mile Walk

- starring Paul, Chris, Andrew, Rick, Macca, Rob, Gary, Frank, Wheaters and Kato

A glorious day in July, in a picture postcard village in Hertfordshire, with all our friends and family cheering us on – we crossed the finishing line and the 100 mile walk was over! There were tears, pains and oh man! - were there blisters! But most of all, there were smiles and laughter and it was this, and the thought of raising as much money as possible, which carried us over that line on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2009.

But all good endings have a beginning and ours was sometime just after we finished last year's marathon walk. Puffed up on success and bloated on Guinness, we were already talking of something more challenging. Various ideas were bandied about as people started recruiting and adding to our team. Before we had the final plan, we had a team – and what a group they were...if the devil could cast a net!! Seven men, keen to get fit and raise money and not at all involved just because it would mean at least two nights away from their wives or partners!

So the plan was eventually agreed – a 100 mile walk along the Grand Union Canal from Solihull to Hemel Hempstead and then a quick lift across country to do the last stretch to end up at the Charity fundraising day at the Red Lion PH in Preston. We'd aim to do it in 3 days, staying away the night before and at the end of the first day. It would mean aiming high on the first day – anywhere under 35miles would leave us too much for the last day and we'd be finishing in the night. I set about planning it - with accommodation a priority. I wanted something that suited our professional backgrounds, our 'man about town' sensibilities and our Georgio Armani tastes.

Unsurprisingly then there were a few raised eyebrows when we pulled up outside our backpackers hostel in the downtown 'Bronx' area of Birmingham. Georgio Armani had clearly left the scene of the crime and I don't think even George at Asda would be seen dead here! But the banter and jokes were already flowing as the lads went and booked in and I chained my car to the nearest policeman. Bizarrely our room was in a separate building about 3 blocks away. A few of us jumped in the car again and drove round to drop off our kit, leaving 'Uncle' Frank (our support driver for the first day) and Andrew chatting to the local crack dealers in the hostel. After a few minutes they realised we weren't there and decided to walk round to meet us. Unfortunately Uncle Frank, being switched on and clever, had taken his expensive camera out of the car because he didn't want it to get stolen, but now had it hanging round his neck on full display as he walked down the dark, deserted backstreets of 'South Central' Birmingham. At the same time, we left our room and drove back round to the hostel. Imagine our surprise and Frank's embarrassment as we drove past him hiding in the shadows and flattened back against a wall like some life-size 'Banksy' graffiti picture. Apparently a car with a dodgy exhaust had driven past Frank and made a loud bang! Uncle Frank thought he was suddenly part of a drive-by shooting and dove for cover trying to hide his

camera in the folds of his Daily Telegraph. I'm sure the words of support and empathy from the rest of the team were a great comfort to him though!

Back then to the hostel for a bowl of soup and bottle of warm beer. The similarities to being at home continued as we were made to wash up our own dishes. We decided that the best way to prepare for a 0230 alarm was to find a pub and drink Guinness so we walked along the road to the closest pub. Even though the sound of thrash metal and smell of fresh blood was quite alluring, we decided to keep walking past the closest pub though and find somewhere a bit more lively. Ending up in a true local's pub we gathered round the table, drank some of the black stuff, said how easy walking 100 miles would be and started planning next year's walk!! "Dublin to Galway anyone?" said Paul after 3 pints, "140 miles should be no problem after tomorrows little jaunt!"...how wrong we were!

We didn't go too mad and got back to the hostel (or should that be 'hostile'?) around 10pm to have a proper look at our room. I considered calling Trading Standards just over the hostels use of the word 'room', as we all surveyed the 4 bunk beds crammed into a stuffy, smelly, 'box' on the second floor for the 7 of us (we were due to meet Rick tomorrow morning). Fresh air was needed ,after our last meal of Guinness, crisps and nuts, but out of the question, when we discovered that one of the sash windows had been nailed shut....We started wondering if they were keeping people out or keeping people in!?

The heat, noises and smells combined to make it a struggle to get to sleep and not long after we had, we were woken by the rest of the 'guests' coming back to their rooms. We considered complaining to the management but no one fancied the 2 block walk back to the main building at that time of night...especially along Uncle Franks 'drive-by alley'! But sleep we did...for at least 30 minutes before Franks snoring woke us all back up again!

In no time at all it was 0230 and the alarm was going. We laughed about the night as we started getting ready and sorted out our kits. Shares in Vaseline went up as we all applied liberal coatings to our more essential 'equipment' – apparently Andrew hadn't made much use of his yet and so didn't want his ruined! The noise of us laughing and preparing obviously disturbed our fellow guests as we heard a knock at our door and then opened it on someone keen to make a complaint. The sight of 7 semi naked sweating men, partially dressed in Lycra shorts and clutching tubs of Vaseline seemed to rob him of his resolve, so we sent him on his way with some gentle words of advice.

So off we set! We hoped that the initial journey wouldn't be indicative of the next 3 days as we got hopelessly lost trying to find the bridge in sleepy Catherine De Barnes where we were meeting our final walker Rick. On meeting him he immediately eased his way into our hearts by informing us that we could have stayed in his parent's plush home nearby last night!! And miss that hostel? Never!

At 0415 we finally started the walk. We knew it was forecast as one of the hottest days of the year so we hoped to get as many miles done as possible before midday. The spirits were high as we walked along the towpath of the Grand Union Canal in the dark and misty morning. The only noises were birds whistling, fish jumping and our knees cracking. I'm sure we were all thinking this was easy as we knocked out the first 4 hours. We were making a good pace...but then the sun started coming up properly and we were given a small indication of what the rest of the day would be like. 9am and it was hot!! Our first proper stop came at about 10am and Frank had done us proud with cups of tea and with finding a great place in the shade to adjust our kit and start tending to our feet and other tender areas. We tucked into some great food provided by Mo' – salad and chicken - and spoke to Frank about where our next check point would be.

The next part of the walk was along good paths and as the temperature started to creep up we made good steady progress. All of us moved from group to group, from pair to pair and generally had a good chat with each other and a good laugh. Even during the harder parts to come it was rare that every so often we couldn't hear someone burst into laughter...or sometimes into a string of profanities!

At the second proper stop around midday, some changed socks, some changed shoes but all of us started to have a close look at our feet which, because of the heat, were swelling up and beginning to rub. Vaseline and tape were applied and we set off again – still in good humour.

The next part of the walk was the most demanding; as the quality of the paths deteriorated and at best were very poor. As we progressed we began to get more strung out as each person dealt with the conditions in their own way. Most of us had hats on and we were going through loads of liquids to replace all the sweat. The paths virtually disappeared as we started walking along bumpy, rocky trails which fell away into the river and were bordered by chest high overgrown nettles and thistles. Paul was in front with a big whacking stick – he seemed strangely familiar with this role – and did his best to beat us a path through. Everyone was suffering from the heat and the effect that the uneven ground was having on our feet. This was making the rubbing worse and some of us started getting real pain from the quickly forming blisters. I noticed that I was beginning to develop a lovely bright rash all the way up my legs and thighs. If the bushes had been red and blotchy I would have been expertly camouflaged!

We had planned to get as close to 40 miles as possible on the first day to 'break the back of it'. Unfortunately though we quickly realised that it was **us** that was being broken – and all on the first day! The God of the Canal Bridges seemed to be conspiring against us too as their frequency and the sequential numbers marked on all of them, began to make no sense. We were working down from the 160's and 133 was the 35mile marker. The trouble was that sometimes there was an a, b and c for each bridge, sometimes there were 2 or 3 next to each other and other times

they were a mile apart! On occasions we were sure that the heat was making bridge shaped mirages in the distance as we weren't getting any closer.

Eventually we made it to the outskirts of Northampton and Paul and Macca (who were ahead) arranged a suitable meeting point for Frank where we could re-group, assess how far we'd walked and to see if anyone wanted to go further. We finally all got back together and got out of the sun. We were in bits! We'd been walking for 12 hours in almost 100 degree heat, along rocky paths and through horrible bushes – none of us had expected it to have been so difficult! We worked out that we'd walked about 34 miles and none of us were in any state to carry on – so we retired to a nearby pub!

Fortunately the pub had a sign saying "Sweaty, dirty, smelly walkers welcome" and it was like a scene from 'Ice Cold in Alex' as we found comfy sofas and collapsed into them. Taking our shoes and socks off in the bar may have been a bit too far though, but we were in no mood to examine the licensing small print as we all surveyed our injuries – which were considerable! Rob already had the makings of a comedy cartoon 'smacked with a hammer' toe, a few others had blisters the size of er...huge blisters and only Andrew – in his Green Arrow Tesco special trainers – seemed to be relatively ok. My rash was at its peak and I feared that my Sports Illustrated centre spread was in serious jeopardy....but the pint of cold Guinness began to ease the pain.

Frank did the honours and got us back to our hotel a few miles away in 2 trips and we soon made great use of the shower and bath. After this Chris said he felt like a new man and fortunately he had one in his room - Rick! Next to the hotel was a restaurant so we re-grouped there to refuel and drink beer. By this stage I was already trying to plan an alternative and shorter route as it felt like we had bitten off more than we could chew. We'd left ourselves too much for the next two days, we'd picked up too many bad injuries, blisters and rashes and the heat had seriously exhausted us. Added to this, we could all sense the worry in the voices of our friends and families when we'd been phoning them through the day and no one wanted to make it any worse for them either. The one thing that remained though was the humour, as we all relayed stories of the day's trials and tribulations as we downed several cold drinks. So, eventually, across several mixed grills and Andrews coq au vin, I pitched a new shorter route. However, after much discussion and the displaying of steely eyed resolve from the likes of Rick and Chris we decided on a compromise. We would get an early night, abort the 5am start the next morning, get a lay in and then get to an early chemist to seek advice for our blisters and get them treated. We would then start off, stick to good paths and if we couldn't find them we would walk on roads – and we'd see how it went. I don't mind saying that I really didn't think we stood a chance of doing the full 100 miles at this point but I was encouraged by the high spirits and general good mood of the team.

The idea about choosing roads over tow paths was dreamt up by Uncle Frank as, during the day spent driving and waiting, he had spent some time reading the

Canal Guidebook which I had bought when I originally planned the route....and it came to pass that he read it more thoroughly than me! Frank deciphered the hidden code and found the invisible ink sections – or ‘big boldly typed areas’ in laymans terms – which clearly identified the stretches of tow path where there **was** no path i.e. those which we had walked! He clearly had my feelings in mind and was conscious of any embarrassment which he could cause me – as he announced his findings across the table to the group in his lovely lilting LOUD Irish accent – bless him! He and Paul then apparently entered a contest for most use of the word ‘feck’ in one sentence, as they gently chided me over my error.

With decisions made, alcohol coursing through our bodies and the efforts of the day beginning to kick in, we retired to our rooms around 9pm after I had dropped Frank off at the station - his work done and his help invaluable. I did the right thing and let Rob have the double bed and I took the sofa bed which was ever so slightly too short for me. After a while this started to ever so slightly get on my nerves so I moved the mattress onto the floor and tried to sleep again. After another while, a group of guests who at midnight found it a jolly wheeze to sit talking outside my open window, started to ever so slightly wind me up. I gave it a few minutes and then ever so loudly asked them to move or get hurt. If they knew that I could barely shuffle to the window they’d have still been there now!

8am on day 2 and we were awake and moving...barely! The aches and pains were expected and not too bad – it was just the state of our feet and the size of the blisters which worried us. ‘Wheaters’ our driver for the day had driven up from Stevenage and was there to inject his Geordie humour into the proceedings. However the first laugh was **from** him as he watched us shuffle out of our rooms to the car-park. We eased ourselves into the cars and drove to the nearest Tesco’s where we stocked up on liquids and medicines. Just before we left we remembered that some food for the day may be a good idea too – so we shopped again! Then onto the nearby Chemist which was about to open. Andrew clearly had another kind of biological procedure in mind as he stopped to ask a young pregnant mum the way. She pointed over his shoulder to where the green fluorescent sign saying ‘Pharmacy’ gave us our next clue. We laid siege to the premises while we waited for it to open and then hobbled in like some arthritic Viking raiding party and pillaged the chemist of its plasters, medical tape and anti histamine cream for my legs – now diagnosed as prickly heat and not the more masculine Deadly Canal Rash as I had hoped. Clutching more medication than a Pete Docherty lookalike contest, we headed off to the day’s starting point which was a quaint little village on the southern side of Northampton. We parked up, opened the triage and got ourselves ready. Then at around 9.30am we headed off along the tow path...for about 2 miles before the good path ran out – so we turned round and walked back to the car! It all counted though as the pedometer racked up the inches made! We then walked the road parallel to the canal for another couple of hours before we could go on the towpath again....for at least ½ a mile before it got bad again! We turned

around again and walked back to the car – we were still clocking up miles but we were in danger of disappearing up our own unmentionables!

We took a break at this point and looked again at our blisters. Paul could see that the tape he'd put on earlier had caused more blisters so he took it all off and decided to clench his teeth instead! Rob's foot was getting worse and he needed another Chemist run in order to replace the baby wipes and tape he'd wrapped his feet in! So Wheaters stepped in as sub for the next section until Rob drove to the Chemist and back. Another few miles were clocked up in the meantime and Wheaters did the right thing and got himself a blister out of sympathy.

The rest of the day was a blur of stretches of path, stretches of road and stretches of pain – but the resolve was still there! We clocked up the miles as we drifted from good paths to bad. Wheaters clocked up the speeding points as he found the busy A roads which we later walked and took our lives in our hands on! The effect of our injuries and blisters was evident by the way the group was thinning out. Paul and Macca were usually up ahead scouting the path and scaring the locals, I was somewhere in the middle and in and out of the comedy troupe of Rob, Sean, Rick and Chris at the rear. But we plodded on and soon entered the outskirts of Milton Keynes after one great stop at a canal side pub. Here we had a cup of tea and realised that we'd made a massive effort for the first part of the day and if we carried this on for the afternoon we stood a good chance of making a good total for the day. This was the first point of that day that I started to think that we could actually do it again and it acted as a boost to us all as we went back onto the great towpaths that encircled Milton Keynes. Our target for the day was Fenny Stratford on the South East side of the town so we kicked on, helped on our way by the regular ½ litre bottles of water that Wheaters handed out between 4 of us!!!

This 'kick on' looked to be the undoing of Macca and I as we both suddenly felt as if we couldn't walk any further and we collapsed by Wheaters and the support car. Macca was getting bad pains down his legs – which would later be diagnosed as symptoms of the full blown diabetes which he didn't even know he had! My feet and hips were locking up so we decided to have our own rest as I fought back the tears of frustration. We got a lift for a mile or so and rejoined the path feeling slightly better for the brief interlude.

I used the canal guide and the pedometer to identify a suitable stopping point for the day, which by luck rather than judgement turned out to be a pub! Then as we all regrouped I revealed that we'd walked another 34 miles which was a major achievement and we knew the total was within our reach with one more major push the following day. Paul and Wheaters did well and headed back to Northampton to pick up Wheaters car and then returned for us. We then all drove back to Stevenage where Paul, Chris, Rick and Sean were staying at my house. The plan was to meet at mine at 3am the next morning so that we would have time to stop at the 24hrs Tescos for supplies before heading back up to where we stopped today in Milton Keynes. Again our support driver had done a grand job and we could all

hear him giggling as he drove off into the night...only stopping when he received the summons in the post from Northants Police.

My wife Tracy did us all a great meal and it was a real boost for us all to see family and friends. Again we tended our wounds and blisters and none of us were looking forward to that early start tomorrow as we finally bedded down around 11pm. Three hours sped past and the alarm soon sounded at 0215am. Walking was a real problem for me until I loosened up a bit and *waking* was clearly a real problem for Andrew and Rick as I had to shout at them several times before they managed to get themselves up – bless em!

The rest of the team appeared, shuffling out of the early morning mist like somebody's bad nightmare. I could see Rob was doing pigeon steps – to conserve energy I thought – but no, he physically could not move one foot further in front of the other due to his blisters and what by now was an infected big toe. Our final support driver Kato arrived and we headed off in two cars to Tesco's. We all stocked up on more Ibuprofen (which we'd been eating like sweets over the last two days), food, drink and plasters. Andrew was caught putting a packet of condoms in *his* basket and replied "well – you never know!" to our quizzical looks!

We arrived at a car park near our canal starting point in Fenny Stratford and slowly clambered out of the cars to begin putting on our walking clothes, Lycra shorts, Vaseline and plasters. Pretty soon we were aware of the attention we were getting from Buckinghamshire's only all night Gay club the 'Pink Panther' across the road from our car park. Paul was getting the lions share due to the leather chaps which he'd bizarrely chosen to wear that day!

For the last time we set off and it was a beautiful, quiet, still, warm morning and we knew that we only had about 30 miles to get through today before we could finish around the Hemel area. We would then get picked up and driven back to Hitchin where we would join Sue, Andy and other family and friends and then walk the last couple of miles together into Preston village, the pub and the finishing line! I now knew that we could possibly do it! I'd seen the commitment, drive and determination of this group to finish what they started and to bring home the sponsor money to this great cause! So on we went!

Again we mixed it up between towpath and road and at some points we thought we'd lost some of the team. Chris hit his own personal wall and fell away from the pack as his mobile phone died and, in his own words, he started to question his ability to finish. Up ahead at a resting point we tried constantly to get hold of him. I rang Rob who was walking alone and who we had also expected to see turning a corner towards us by now. I'd rung through directions to him earlier and he should have left the path for road a mile back. After asking him where he was, he replied that he kind of liked the rough path and so had carried on along it – comedy toe and everything! So we had a couple of walkers ahead on the road, some resting,

one on the path making school kids laugh with his toe and Chris sitting in a bush back in Milton Keynes doing his best Colonel Kurtz impression!

Fortunately Chris was ok and we all got back together at the next main stop after another mad walk along a busy road. The end was truly in our sights now and the weather was on our side too, as we got to the outskirts of Hemel Hempstead. At one point I was up ahead with Paul who was still carrying his big whacking stick and who had taken to whacking the underside of each bridge with it as he passed. As the next bridge came up, he took no notice of the large amount of pigeon droppings beneath it and used his stick to whack it with all his strength. The suddenness and loudness of the flock of pigeons bolting out of the underside of the bridge, in the general direction of the bloke with the big whacking stick, caught the bloke with the big whacking stick completely off guard and he hit the ground like a safe! I laughed like a loon until I came to my senses and realised it's **never** a good idea to laugh like a loon at your father in law..and so began to control myself. Paul took it in his stride and he'd convinced the pigeons it was *their* fault by the time we both regained our composure.

So – onwards! Smooth tow paths passed under foot, statue-like fishermen went by unnoticed and canal boats drifted lazily and effortlessly past - their occupants relaxing in deck chairs and drinking G&T's...while Sean and Rick tried to stone them from the banks, disgusted at their apparent lack of appreciation of our torture and pain!

We were in the heart of Hemel now and several times we'd break the crest of a hill or round a corner to find our intrepid driver for the day sunbathing in a deck chair on the path. Kato was clearly in touch with his role and the fact that we could see him obviously suffering too, gave us new hope. On one occasion he made like a pigeon and jumped out on me from the bushes, causing a burst of adrenalin inside me which I was appreciative of!

It was busier now on this glorious Saturday morning at the start of July. Hemel was looking good with groups of people enjoying themselves by the canal. Unfortunately we weren't – and any attempts to engage with the public and inform them of our cause and tell them why we looked so bad, fell on deaf ears. To them we were transients from Birmingham, illegal immigrants from another part of the country, a bunch of tramps in dirty smelly clothes limping along the riverbank. But to us we were an intrepid bunch of adventurers! We'd put in the miles and gone through the pain and we were near the end! We'd bonded as a team, helped each other through the rough times and now could see the prize! We could do anything now, we were invincible - and then Rick was run over by pushbike and the illusion was shattered!

It wasn't that dramatic – in fact it was pretty pathetic really: an old lady on a Raleigh tourer bike, moving only so slightly faster than us, but in the opposite direction. I'm sure Rick knew what he had to do – after all he's a clever lad. It was simple – he needed to move to the opposite side of the path to the cyclist. The lady,

surely having previously ridden past other walkers, knew what she should do too – stay on the other side of the path to Rick! But this was clearly too much information for the pair of them. In the height of his exhaustion and pain, Rick looked into the eyes of the lady cyclist as she got closer, head down, headphones on, listening to audio books of Mrs Marple – Rick, not the cyclist. And at that critical moment, Rick threw in a body swerve and stepped into the path of the bike! Carnage!! Profanities and expletives may have been the first thing out of many people's mouths but no, this was the English countryside, in the summer, by a canal bank – this was Rick, a push-bike and Mrs Miggins. Witnesses (i.e. Rob, Andrew and Chris) later said in statements, that even **before** the collision they were sure they could hear Rick and the old lady putting out pre-emptive apologies, which gradually increased in volume as the distance between them got smaller! Until there was a small crashing noise almost drowned out by cries of "oh! I'm awfully sorry!" The injury toll was thankfully low but the entertainment value was sky high as we left the cyclist scrabbling to stop her bag of Maris Piper potatoes pouring from her basket into the canal...and on we went – again!

Round another corner and into Berkhamstead, busy streets split by the canal and then finally a bridge and a pub! Fantastic! We limped into the beer garden at the side of the canal, moved customers out of seats just by our smell and dared the landlord to throw us out. This was a great moment! We knew we had at most only an hour or two to go and we knew we'd get there on petrol fumes. So there was lots of relieved nervous laughter and the pain and blisters didn't seem to matter anymore. What mattered was us, our team and the reason why we were doing this – nothing was more important!

Into the home stretch and Paul forged ahead with me staying in touch on the mobile. We walked into the lovely new development which was Apsley lock – and then came the call that we'd been waiting for! It was Paul saying we'd done it, we'd reached our target of 30 miles for the day and we knew the final 2 miles back in Hitchin was all that was left. After a few minutes we were all back together and there were handshakes, back slaps and hugs all around as we celebrated our achievement. I'm sure that we each thought at various stages we'd never do it – I know **I** did - but we **had** and it was a fantastic feeling.

I'd rung ahead and within a few minutes Kato and Richard had arrived to take us back to meet the others at the Three Moorhens Pub in Hitchin. After a short journey we were there and it was great to see Sue, Andy, Arthur and other friends and family – all of us now with our charity t-shirts on and proudly displayed. The plan was to walk the 2 miles or so along the country road into Preston and on the way we'd be joined by Jerry, Sylvie and Andrew who'd done a marathon distance walk that day up from London.

So off we set for the final stretch – about 20 of us in bright yellow Cystinosis Charity t-shirts, weaving between the traffic as we walked out of the town centre and into the country. What a great feeling this was! All our pains and worries were forgotten

as we chatted and walked with the people who really counted! The laughter and humour was still there as we told stories of our 3 day adventure and started to ready ourselves for what we knew would be an emotional finish. After a short while we were joined by Jerry and the others who themselves had made a major effort that day – and on we walked!

Several cars with friends and family who were helping run the fundraising fete at the pub ahead, drove down to meet us. With horns blaring and people cheering out the window, the excitement and anticipation of the end to come was building. Eventually we walked into the outskirts of Preston village and just before the end we regrouped and were joined by our kids and more family to walk the final few steps onto the village green.

So, “on a glorious day in July, in a picture postcard village in Hertfordshire, with all our friends and family cheering us on – we crossed the finishing line and the 100 mile walk was over! There were tears, pains and oh man! - were there blisters! But most of all, there were smiles and laughter” .

We’d done it! It was over...and it had been emotional!