

## Old King Coal

Halmer End Walk, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2023

Distance: 8.54 according to Strava.

Ascent: 790ft According to Strava

People: Richard (Leader) and Della Calder, Dave Barker, Janet Murray, Lesley Arrowsmith, Mike and Selina Willis, Fred and Anne Morris, Ian Langford, Derek Burrows, Jim Simpson and Mark Hallet.

The one and only Jasper the dog.

As this walk was slated for a bank holiday Friday it seemed like a good idea to stay relatively local and avoid the mayhem on the roads. Halmer End in North Staffordshire is only 40 minutes from Bunbury consequently a leisurely 09:15 getaway saw everyone arriving at the start by 10:00. Our starting point was at Minnie Pit, scene of the Staffordshire coalfield's worst mining disaster in January 1918 resulting in the deaths of 156 men and boys due to an underground explosion of firedamp (gas). The local community still remembers this and in 2018 a memorial was erected on the site of the pit head and 156 trees planted, one for each victim. The price of coal was always high.

After paying our respects we set off heading uphill past a small fishing lake towards Halmer End across an area which once was busy with railways and tramways but has now returned to nature thanks to the National Coal Board and Staffordshire Wildlife Trust. The general area is called Bateswood Nature Reserve and was once the home of no less than seven collieries and their associated railway network. For all its industrial past it is amazing that there is barely anything left from its past history.

At the top of the reserve, we crossed a road and made our way through fields up to the top of Burgess's Wood pausing on the way to take in the extensive view across Cheshire to Beeston and beyond to the Welsh Hills. Ian Langford was suitably impressed that the leader permitted stops to admire the view and it's rumored he might rejoin BUMS next year! We exited the wood onto The Drive, a gravel lane on the top edge of Apedale Country Park (again courtesy of the NCB) heading towards Alsagers Bank. Not far along the lane a sneaky little stile gave us access to more fields which lead us onto the recreation ground behind the village and the leader called a coffee stop to take advantage of the benches next to the children's play area. Ian was impressed with the opportunity to have a sit down on a seat for coffee and the leaders stock rose further. Following coffee we were soon in the centre of the village but quickly regained the fields again as we followed paths towards Scot Hay. Avoiding the village by staying on the field paths we were soon brought to a halt by an impenetrable thicket of nettles and brambles on a rarely used path. The leader sounded the retreat and we backtracked 100 metres to a stile into Silverdale Country Park (another NCB legacy) and followed a nicely graded path to meet up with our abandoned route at the road. Mike Willis knew of Silverdale as his Great great great Grandfather worked there once upon a time, apologies Mike if I got the wrong number of greats!

A short trudge along a quiet road and we were able to clamber over another of the 25 plus stiles on our route (counted by chief stile counter Della) into a paddock which cut a corner and lead us to Haying Wood. The wood was once home to an ironstone mine and a colliery but nowadays it is regularly assaulted by 4x4 off-roaders who have done a pretty good job of turning the tracks into quagmires. A bit of fancy footwork to avoid the worst of the mud brought us to Hollywood Lane leading to? Yep, you guessed it.....Finney Green. Fortunately, the lane is not nearly challenging enough for the offroad fraternity and it provided a nice stroll. Passing through the rather uncared for farm at Finney Green we took a right heading to Leycett, home to yet another colliery.

By now we were getting ready for a bite to eat and a short climb up to Scot Hay brought us out at the cricket ground and the leaders ultimate surprise for Mr. Langford et al. Cricket as we know is mainly a spectator sport due to the fact there are only ever 13 players on the pitch out of a total of 22 and the spectators are well catered for at Scot Hay with an impressive row of comfortable benches. What more could one want? Well, a beer would be nice and as the clubhouse was open various BUMS availed themselves of a pint to help the sandwiches go down. For security reasons I can't name names for fear of expulsion from BUMS, what happens on the walk stays on the walk!

After lunch we headed back downhill towards Bateswood again and circled round a large open area to Bullthorns Wood and the ominous roar of the adjacent M6 motorway. A chat with a local in the wood informed us we were heading for the Devils Spring and that during the 1926 General Strike the local miners had illegally dug coal in the wood to keep them warm during the strike. Intrigued we wandered down to the M6 intending to attempt the first crossing of this motorway in BUMS history. As with all trailblazing we encountered considerable difficulty negotiating Himalayan Balsam, brambles, nettles and finally a hidden piece of wood across the path felling Ian on the way. Undeterred we pressed on and soon gained access to the underpass taking the footpath and the Devils Spring to the other side of the motorway. The exit on the other side offered a similar cocktail of vegetation but soon a small bridge over the stream gave us access to the field on the other side of the M6 with the old lorry trailers parked in it, well Ian certainly knew where he was now as he passed them often enough during his travels.

More fields, some with cattle in and we were safely back on a hard track leading us back to the M6 and after recrossing over it we were about to face our greatest peril from of all things retired horses! Yes, our penultimate fields were the retirement home for all shapes and sizes of horses living out their autumn years in peace and tranquility next to the roaring M6. As with all older generations there were those oblivious to our presence and those who resented our being in their domain. In spite of having Mike "The Horse Whisperer" Willis with us one of the smaller ponies decided he was not happy a dog was walking across his paddock and chased Dave and Jasper as they made haste to the stile. The little b\*gger attempted to stamp on and bite Jasper who was by this time trembling with fear. Luckily the stile and temporary safety was not too far away. We were not out of the woods though and the group formed a human shield between the horses and Dave and Jasper until we were safely on an adjoining lane.

Before we left the last horse field though we were treated to a close up encounter with a young hare who lay low until we were almost upon him then darted lazily away at 30mph as they do.

One last field, a few bullocks and we were back at Minnie Pit chastened but unharmed. Jasper was happy to be back at the car and I'm surprised Dave didn't bring him into the pub for a calming pint at the Dysart!

Thanks again for you company.

Richard