

Features

Andrew Vine

How a media mogul was called to account and found wanting 13



Today's TV

Your complete programme guide 14

Nagging doubt that led to trek through Britain



Ten years ago Mike Brockhurst started walking and didn't stop. Sarah Freeman catches up with him as he attempts to walk the length of Britain.

WHEN Mike Brockhurst was in his early 40s he felt something was missing from his life.

It wasn't a full blown midlife crisis, more a nagging doubt that wouldn't go away. It was then, as Mike was coasting along, that a friend suggested they go for a walk.

"I was hooked immediately," he says of that first walk which took him into the Dales from his home in Harrogate. "I grew up in Northallerton and used to be in the great outdoors all the time, but as I got older other things took over.

"I had definitely become stuck in a rut, but as soon as I got into the hills it gave me a sense of perspective about things. It made me feel alive. From that day on walking became part of me and whenever I could I found myself up on the Moors or the Dales, just me, the hills and a few sheep. "Hitting 40 does make people question things. You look back on the things you've done and you realise how short life is, certainly it's too short not to make the most of the wonderful landscape we are so blessed to live in."

It was another birthday, his 55th, which inspired Mike's latest venture. At the end of May he set off on a 1,100 mile walk from Faraid Head in the far north of Scotland to Lizard Point in Cornwall.

When we speak, it's day 53. Mike has just passed through home territory, walking through Sedburgh to the Yorkshire Dales before dropping down into Hebden Bridge and onwards to the Peak District. He's now in the Midlands and with another three weeks of walking to go, the blisters are starting to hurt.

"When you're walking 14 miles a day for 80 days carrying a 15 kilo backpack, there's going to be a few problems, but nothing that can't be bandaged. By the time I got to Fort William on day 19 I had suffered impact damage on my heels so had to take an unscheduled break.

"I've caught up but it's hard on the feet and the knees aren't what they were."

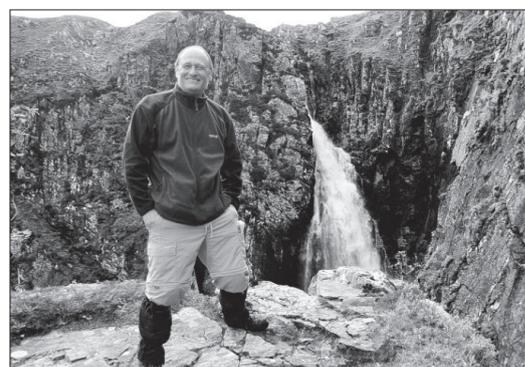
For the first few weeks Mike deliberately walked alone. A general manager at Balfour Beatty, the construction firm have given him a six month sabbatical to complete the challenge and he was determined, initially at least, to get away from it all.

"There's something bleak about the landscape in the far north of Scotland that suits a little solitary walking. It's the perfect place to have time to think. For the first three weeks I saw no one and the solitude was incredibly refreshing.

"However, you can have too much of a good thing and since



ON THE WAY: Mike Brockhurst on his trek from Faraid Head in the far north of Scotland to Lizard Point in Cornwall to raise money for charity. Along the way he has been joined by all sorts of people: "It's been fantastic, people I've never met before have just turned up," he said.



I left Scotland I've had a fair amount of company."

His wife, Lil, joined him for a while and friend Steve Scott has been a near constant companion since he arrived in England. However, he's also been accompanied on route by complete strangers who have heard about his expedition.

"It's been fantastic, people I've never met before have just turned up. Some join Steve and I for the day, others just do a few miles, but that's part of the fun of doing something like this, you never know what the next day will bring."

Mike had been planning his journey down the length of Britain for some months, but when he set out he knew the one thing he could never plan for was the weather. In Scotland he faced dense mist, in the Borders he was blessed with sunshine and in Yorkshire, perhaps quite typically, the heavens opened.

"If I had managed to get through 11 weeks without getting wet it would have been a miracle," says Mike. "However, even by British standards, the rain walking into Hebden Bridge was pretty spectacular. The original idea had been to camp, but the fields around the town were awash and we were soaked. It was the

kind of day when you are really grateful to see civilisation. We've occasionally had to seek sanctuary in disused barns and there have been some days when we've seen an awful lot of mud."

Not that Mike minds too much. Whatever the weather he and Steve's bags have been packed by 9am at the latest and by the time they finish in the early evening there is just time for a meal and a couple of pints before bedtime.

"The other night I was in bed before 8.30pm. Even for me that seemed a little early, but I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer. However, every night I've gone to sleep exhausted, but happy."

"When I started thinking about this walk, the idea was to seek

out the most spectacular places for walking this country has to offer. I wanted to see dramatic mountains, cascading waterfalls, limestone pavements and beautiful lakes, but it was also about absorbing the culture of Great Britain.

"I spent hours looking at maps deciding which was the best course to take and it was then I realised just how lucky we are in this country that we have so many long distance paths and national trails that wind their way around the most dramatic landscape.

"This was never about taking the most direct course, but it was about seeking out the most interesting features. If I came across an interesting diversion,

I want to be able to explore and a lot of the route has been spontaneous."

As well as tending to his blisters, each night, Mike also uploads his thoughts on that day's progress, along with marks out of 10 for scenery and historical interest to his website. He set up the Walking Englishman a few years ago and as well as detailing hundreds of routes across the country, with about 100,000 hits a day, it has also become something of a forum for those who share his love of the outdoors.

"Through the website I have a lot of correspondence with people from different parts of the world who have all fallen in love with Britain because of its views," he says. "The Coast to Coast route was named as one of the best walks in the world, second only to Great Wall of China.

"When you stop to think about that for a moment, it's incredible and one of the great things about this walk is that it has allowed me to see how the environment changes as you move from north to south. We live in the most beautiful country in the world."

While the walk represents a personal challenge for Mike, he's also using it to raise money for Balfour Beatty's Building Better Futures charity, which helps

support young people from less well off homes. His aim is to raise £10,000 through pledges, but along the way he has also been collecting money for smaller charitable organisations in Harrogate.

"We were walking out of Glossop the other day and stopped at a pub where we got chatting to a cyclist. As he left, he pushed a £20 note across the table. That kind of thing has happened quite a lot and people have given us discounts on lodgings or meals.

"It's those kind of things that restore your faith in human nature. So many of us work such long hours that we barely have time for anything else, but something like this makes you realise that every so often you just need to take your foot off the pedal."

Mike is not sure exactly how many miles he has covered in the last decade or so, but he's more than made up for his years of inactivity and he admits that he has become almost evangelical about the benefits of walking.

"I've missed my wife, I missed home cooking, I've missed having a bath and being clean and I've missed my own bed," he says. "But in return I've had adventures that most people only dream of. There's something about getting up each morning and pulling on your walking boots which is incredibly exhilarating."

Today, Mike is due to arrive in Cheltenham. In his final two weeks he will take in Bath, Cheddar and Truro, along with a dozen more smaller hamlets and villages. When he finally gets to Lizard Point he hopes the champagne will already be on ice.

"I'm trying not to think too far ahead, but it does now feel like the end is in sight," he says. "I don't know quite how I will feel once it's all over, but I expect I will have mixed emotions. Who knows, I may even decide to turn back and retrace my steps."

He's joking of course, but when he crosses the finishing line, Mike Brockhurst's walking days will be far from over.

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CHARITIES TO BENEFIT FROM THE WALK

MIKE is hoping to raise money to support two charities close to his heart.

Donations made through his Just Giving site will go to Building Better Futures, which was set up by Balfour Beatty two years ago to support vulnerable young people across the country. Money collected along the route will be given to the Harrogate Skills For

Living Centre, which helps people of all ages with learning difficulties. Mike's brother, Dave, works at the centre and a number of those who use the facilities accompanied him on part of the Yorkshire section of his mammoth walk.

For more details of Mike's walk and how to donate, visit his website at www.walkingenglishman.com

Ministers set stage for new war of words on badger cull



The Government may have decided to introduce a badger cull, but as Chris Bond reports it is not the end of the story.

THE debate over whether to cull badgers to tackle bovine TB is one that has bitterly polarised farmers and animal welfare campaigners – and long proved a major problem for ministers.

So yesterday's Government announcement supporting a science-led cull of badgers in the worst affected areas was always going to divide opinion.

It is part of a wider programme to eradicate bovine TB that includes routine testing and surveillance and the slaughter of infected animals. There is also £20m being spent over the next five years to develop effective cattle and badger vaccines as soon as possible. But with this still some way off it is the idea of a cull that grabs the headlines.

In announcing the move Environment Secretary Caroline Spelman said it wasn't a decision that had been taken lightly.

"I wish there was some other practical way of dealing with this, but we can't escape the fact that the evidence supports the case for a controlled reduction of the

badger population in areas worst affected by bovine TB."

Under the plans, which are being piloted in two areas, groups of farmers would hire a licensed marksman to shoot badgers on their land for a period of six weeks, for four years.

The RSPCA called it a "black day for badgers", accusing the Government of "slowly shredding its own animal welfare credentials". Colin Booty, senior scientist for the organisation, said the RSPCA was sympathetic to farmers struggling to cope with the effects of this crippling disease but that a badger cull was not the answer. "We believe that the Government have taken the wrong fork in the road with this risky policy. This cull will contribute little or nothing to the long-term goal of eradicating TB nationally."

However, the National Farmers' Union (NFU) argue it is not about eradicating badgers, but eradicating the disease. "Sometimes we have to do what is unpopular because we know it is right. Not taking action is



DEATH THREAT: Farmers say a cull is the only way to curb TB in cattle but animal welfare groups claim vaccination and other measures are better.

no longer an option and the Government has recognised that," said NFU President Peter Kendall. "As the most recent science shows badger controls are absolutely necessary, together with cattle controls, to get on top of this devastating disease."

So far, there are only a small

number of cases of bovine TB in cattle in Yorkshire and there is no evidence of the disease in the local badger population, but the fears are that it will spread north.

Rates of tuberculosis in cattle have doubled in less than a decade and last year about 32,000 infected animals were put down,

with tens of millions of pounds spent compensating affected livestock owners.

The problem is that both sides believe they are right. Farmers have repeatedly called for a cull of badgers to tackle what they say is one of the greatest threats facing beef and dairy farmers. They believe that a cull would save them money in the long run.

On the other side of the fence, wildlife and animal welfare organisations, including the Badger Trust and the Wildlife Trusts – whose symbol is the badger – remain opposed to a cull, claiming vaccinating badgers, increased levels of testing, improved biosecurity and stricter controls on the movement of cattle were more effective ways of eradicating bovine TB in cattle for good.

During the last Labour government the then Environment Secretary Hilary Benn ruled out a cull of badgers in England after a major study into culling concluded it was not cost-effective and led badgers to move around – increasing the

disease in the surrounding areas. Last year, researchers looking at data from the randomised badger culling trial (RBCT) found that widespread, repeated culling of badgers could reduce the incidence of disease in cattle herds. The latest work based around this trial found that it continued to have a positive effect in reducing infection in the cull area after the scheme ended, cutting the number of new herds infected by up to 16 per cent.

The findings led leading scientists to conclude that "co-ordinated, sustained and simultaneous" culling would reduce the rate of TB in cattle in the area.

But Lord Krebs, who led a major review on badgers and TB in the 1990s which recommended the culling trial, said only last week that a cull would not be effective, as it would leave about 85 per cent of the problem untreated, and would be a "mistake".

With a nine-week consultation period about to start we haven't heard the last of this.

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