

Chapter 1

The birthday cards were what started it. One Victor Meldrew card would have been bad enough. Two would have set alarm bells ringing. But three!

‘That’s not really how people see me, is it?’

The pause before my wife responds says it all. ‘Well...’

‘Well, what?’

‘I sometimes worry that you’re turning into a ...’

‘A what?’

‘Well, um... an obsessive old git, if you really want to know.’

She laughs, one of those laughs that implies she’s only joking, but it’s less than convincing. I pretend not to notice and press her for evidence to support her allegation.

‘The egg incident.’

‘No really! You’re not serious. I couldn’t just ignore it, could I? And as for that cheeky bastard with the Audi putting his spoke in. All very well for him. It wasn’t his front door they threw it at.’

‘What about the dog-mess campaign?’

‘It’s a menace, you’ve said so yourself. And I still reckon the warning flags were a good idea. OK, I’ll admit a bit more research might have been wise before posting it back through their letterboxes, but you can’t deny that those two women did look very similar.’

We continue in this vein, one purported example after another. It’s as if she’s been saving them up. I’m beginning to wish I hadn’t asked the question. She latches on to my mounting irritation and proffers a solution.

‘You know what I think the problem is? You’re stuck around the house too much. Working from home is all very well but, when you’re not crouching over that bloody computer or monopolising the phone, you’re glowering at the neighbours and turning trivial irritations into

major incidents. You really ought to try and get out more.'

She's right. I have to own up to it. My horizons have shrunk since I stopped going out to work every day. Not enough variety and interaction I suppose. And I'm responding by becoming more boring, grouchy and obsessive by the week. That bloke with the Audi could have been more polite about it, but he hit the nail on the head. I *do* need to get a life. But I'm only fifty-five for God's sake! I'm becoming an old git before my time.

The answer to my problem surely doesn't lie in shackling myself to some dreary employer once again. It's more a case of getting some balance back into my life – new people, new activities, that sort of thing. I consider the possibilities. What could I choose as a way of kick-starting a more varied existence? Perhaps I should join the over-fifties group at the leisure centre – bobbing grey heads up and down the swimming pool every Tuesday and Thursday. No, I'm not quite that far gone. If I'm to be true to my baby-boomer pedigree and recover the spirit of my youth, I need to think about something a bit more challenging.

I fish around in my limited think tank, pulling out and throwing back one pitiful idea after another – too small, too silly, too boring, too tough. Then, one sprat refuses to be thrown back. What about an expedition? I've always fancied tackling a long distance walk, just never got around to it previously. Now could be the time. What could I go for – the Pennine Way perhaps, or Offa's Dike, or maybe the South West Coastal Path? But why stop there? Why not do the whole country – Land's End to John O'Groats? I'm a stranger to much of it – about time I discovered a little more about the place that's nurtured me for the last fifty-five years. I'm moderately fit – shouldn't be too much of a struggle. And doing it on my own would certainly be the way to meet people. Give me plenty of time to sort my thoughts out too – get the world back into proportion.

Over the next few days the idea takes shape. I'm told it's just short of nine-hundred miles from end to end by the shortest route. And I sure as hell wouldn't want to take the shortest route – pounding along busy main roads, lungs full of hydrocarbons and blood spurting from my heels. If I'm going to enjoy it, I'll have to go by footpaths and minor lanes. That's likely to bump the distance well above a thousand miles – maybe eleven hundred. Still, I shan't be trying to smash any

speed or endurance records, so no point in turning it into a slog. I could even divide the journey into three or four stages, take a break between each and do some of the less spectacular bits by bike. Yeah! This is beginning to look like a piece of cake – Land’s End to John O’Groats for softies – all I need now is to get myself organised.

I take myself off to the public library and spend two and a half hours poring over travel books and walking guides until one of the Geography Section’s permanent fixtures, a man with seventy percent proof breath and the look of Rasputin about him, decides I’m a kindred spirit and worth cultivating. As my feigned deafness is clearly unconvincing, I cut short the visit and get out into the fresh air. So much for the planning phase.

In my new-found *Easy Rider* mode, I tell myself that too much in the way of detailed planning would spoil the enjoyment. At least I’ve got a rough idea of where I’m going. As far as I can judge, it’s just a case of following the cliff in a northerly direction out of the Land’s End car park and bearing left when you get to Bristol, making sure you don’t stray far into Wales. I’m sure I can play the thing by ear. Precise target mileages and pre-booked accommodation would be too much hassle. I’ll take my chance with youth hostels and cheap B&Bs and see how I get on from day to day. That’s it then – John O’Groats here we come. Now what about some kit?

The last time I undertook any significant exploration of this country on my own was at the age of seventeen when I sought to demonstrate my self-sufficiency by embarking on a hitchhiking tour of the West Country. In those days you could do that sort of thing without your parents automatically assuming they would next see you on a mortuary slab after your trussed-up naked body had floated onto some empty Cornish beach.

The trip required a rucksack, and the only place I knew that sold such things was an army surplus shop next to the fruit and veg market. There was quite a range to choose from: cavernous grey ones on metal frames at prices higher than I was planning to spend on the whole trip, little khaki ones that could fit comfortably between the shoulder-blades – ideal provided you wished to carry no more than a Bronco toilet roll and a packet of Spangles. Underneath some Swedish Army greatcoats I discovered a shapeless, olive green monstrosity made of that rubber-backed, imitation canvas fabric which, in the 1960s, was

the material of choice for inferior raincoats and those ubiquitous duffel bags. Just the ticket, big and cheap. I bought it.

Come the departure day and my new rucksack was stuffed to the point that I couldn't pull the drawstring tight enough to close the top flap.

'Ah what the hell! It'll probably stretch with use.'

My mum and sister steadied the load on the corner of the kitchen table as I slipped my arms into the straps and drew myself up to a semi-crouch, slightly alarmed at the sensation that my innards were about to drop out onto the floor.

'Isn't it a bit too full?'

'No, it'll be fine,' I croaked. 'Just need to get used to it.'

Twenty miles into the journey, the straps parted company with the rucksack and I was reduced to waddling along with it in my arms like a grossly oversized infant. I stopped at a sewing shop to buy carpet twine and a darning needle and spent half an hour at the side of the road sewing the straps back on. This did the trick for all of three hours before I was back to the monstrous baby routine. Clearly, this state of affairs could not continue. Duffel bag fabric was never intended to take such punishment and neither, it was increasingly apparent, were my shoulders. Next morning found me in a post office cringing at the cost of sending a large parcel to my home address, but then walking out almost upright with a heavily stitched olive green object on my back that was still just about recognisable as a rucksack.

Thirty-eight years on I'm wiser to the value of good equipment and, it has to be said, considerably better off than I was in the sixties but, alas, I'm no less of a cheapskate, and the prospect of shelling out hundreds of pounds to equip myself with state-of-the-art gear for this trip horrifies me. But I've got to bite the bullet. I'm the owner of a waterproof that has long since ceased to be worthy of the name, a pair of boots that seem slightly narrower than the feet for which they are intended, and some shiny polyester walking trousers that would go down a storm at a zip fetishists' convention but leave a lot to be desired as far as normal human movement is concerned. I poke around the darker recesses of outdoor shops looking for items that will be light, waterproof, durable and cheap.

My salvation comes in the form of a factory outlet selling branded gear at knock-down prices. In one wild afternoon I equip myself with

tough and not unstylish trousers, Goretex lined boots, new water-proofs, rucksack and 1000 mile socks. Now there's a piece of marketing brilliance – walking socks guaranteed to last for at least a thousand miles. It sounds such a bloody long way, and who but a complete nerd is actually going to count. 'Dear Sirs, I am returning the enclosed socks which have sprung a hole after only 972 miles. I should be obliged etc.'

How about a technical vest to complete my purchases? A what? Well, it's just a fancy name for a tee-shirt fashioned from artificial fibres that are supposed to wick the sweat away and dry you in next to no time. I'm undecided. I've been wary of putting artificial fibres next to the skin of my upper body ever since I was a teenager, and had to abandon fashionable nylon polo necks because they induced within minutes the sort of underarm odour that would not have been out of place on a sex-starved ferret.

Textile technology must have sorted that one out by now.

I head for the pay point clutching my technical vest.

It is a source of astonishment to me how a few light items combined can suddenly produce one very heavy item. Spread them out on the ground and they would blow away in a moderate breeze. Put them together in a rucksack and you're dealing with something that has all the attributes of a sack of coal. In the spare room I gather up those things essential for an extended walking trip and carefully pack them into my nice new rucksack. On the bathroom scales with the resulting package on my back, I discover that my weight has gone up by almost two and a half stone. Unacceptable. This is meant to be a lean and fast moving unit. The image I catch of myself in the bathroom mirror has more in common with the top-weight entry in a snail race. Time for some serious trimming of requirements. Out go the binoculars. Out goes the sweatshirt – replaced by a lightweight fleece. Out goes the spare pair of shorts.

My survey of the weightiest items in my pack shows towels to be a major issue. Anything bigger than a hand towel adds considerably to the bulk. The outdoor shop appears to offer a solution in the form of a 'camping towel' – lightweight and highly absorbent. I buy one, undeterred by the fact that it has the size, texture and appearance of a yellow duster. I give it a trial run. Absorbent? This thing is the fabric equivalent of those electric hand dryers you find in public lavatories. It

doesn't remove moisture, just moves it around. Running on the spot would be a far more effective way of getting dry. And another thing – how am I going to manage on the beach? I'm not a man of particularly large proportions but maintaining my modesty behind this small rectangle of yellow fluff could be a challenge too far. I don't think I could cope with the ridicule. No, hang the extra weight! A proper towel is the only thing.

To compensate, I redouble my efforts on other equipment. The standard water bottle is discarded in favour of a dinky soft plastic one which packs flat and rolls up when empty. It looks not much stronger than a shampoo sachet, but the manufacturers claim that John Prescott could sit upon it with Ann Widdecombe on his knee without it bursting. I have neither the confidence nor the contacts to put it to the test; I'll take their word for it. And while I'm at it, I'll buy the optional extra 'drinking system' – a two foot length of plastic tubing that clips to your shoulder straps and allows you to take a drink any time without troubling to get the bottle out of your rucksack. A bit pretentious, I know, but unhitching and re-hitching yourself every time you want something from your bag can, they say, significantly slow your progress and add to the hassle. I could get an extra half mile a day out of this piece of tube.

I'm overly preoccupied with how to record my journey as I go. A notebook and pencil is the obvious answer, but I'm an inveterate techno-freak and I crave something sophisticated. The prospect of weeks spent attempting to transcribe my impenetrable scribble after the event doesn't appeal at all. Wouldn't it be nice to have my material in a form that could be transferred straight to my word processor for a bit of gentle tidying? My attention turns to the new generation of hand held computers – light, portable and packing the amount of power that twenty years ago would have been regarded as adequate for a NASA moon shot. But there's a difficulty – getting the information into them in the first place. Anything that meets my weight requirements sports a Lilliputian keyboard or relies on recognition of handwriting entered with a stylus on a pressure sensitive screen. Given my inadequacy with pen and paper, this doesn't sound like a recipe for success. The answer to my needs emerges in the form of a product hailed as a design miracle with a small but genuine touch type keyboard. What's more, it weighs in at no more than two pairs of

underpants, and works off standard batteries with a promised life of thirty hours – important on a journey where the opportunity to top up the rechargeable variety can't be relied upon. Yes, this is the one for me.

Just one small problem – I'm unwilling to go out and buy one. I write to the manufacturers with an offer they can't refuse. If they are prepared to provide me with one of these technological wonders, I will happily give it a one thousand mile road test, and compile a full length book on it as I go. More, I will make sure that my readers know this masterpiece has been produced on their pocket sized PA. Excellent cheap promotion, eh?

They don't trouble to reply.

Swallowing my pride I buy one anyway, determined that as revenge I will expose its weaknesses and bring the company's share price crashing down. Unfortunately, I discover that the bursting of the dotcom bubble has already done that for me, and anyway weaknesses are hard to find. After a bit of practice I can type at up to twenty-odd words a minute and can manage about half an hour before I go completely bog-eyed staring at the tiny screen. In final triumph I discover that the space-bar doesn't work unless it is struck precisely on the middle, and this frequently results in text where six or seven words are run together. But even this source of complaint is denied me when the assistant at John Lewis cheerfully exchanges my defective machine for one that operates properly. Bugger!

All the walking books warn about pitching in to solid long distance stuff without adequate preparation. I reason that it would be a good idea to get in some day walks before embarking on the real thing, but the weather and my body conspire to deny me much needed practice. It rains throughout the early spring and, worse, I acquire a pain in my hip that keeps me awake at night and makes walking to the front gate a misery. Psychosomatic? Surely not. Must be something desperately serious. I'm convinced that hip replacement is an inevitability, but the osteopath diagnoses referred pain from a trapped nerve and charges outrageous sums to pinion me and subject my spine to the sort of treatment that, in any other circumstances, would find him answering a charge in the Magistrate's Court.

After three weeks of this indignity the pain starts to ease a little. The weather has improved too. I'm suddenly convinced that I must

seize the moment before some further impediment crops up. I cancel the remaining osteopath appointments and buy a single ticket to Penzance. But my decisiveness is accompanied by anxiety. How will my hip respond to twenty miles a day of cliff walking? And what about the boots? I've had no opportunity to break in the new ones. Should I take a chance on them or stick with the old ones?

I plod round and round the bedroom, one from each pair on my feet, trying to work out which will be the better bet. As a road test it leaves something to be desired but, after fifteen minutes of dithering, I plump for the old ones. Five minutes later I change my mind in favour of the new.

Salisbury to Penzance is surely not one of the great railway journeys of the world. We lurch from one minor west-country station to another, taking on and disgorging successive waves of shoppers, school kids and frazzled commuters. The only other long distance travellers in the compartment are three new-agers – funny, I thought they always went by VW camper van – and a man who bears an uncanny resemblance to the office prankster from *The Fast Show*. He sits opposite me, busily shuffling through a folder entitled '50 Activities for Self Improvement'. He endlessly orders and reorders them, tearing some up – presumably the ones that didn't work – and making little marks in red felt tip on others. I can't help but think that number one on his list of activities might be to pop down to the charity shop with his tartan trousers and gingham shirt.

But who am I to criticise? Here I am in my new walking trousers, my technical vest, my old boots (Hmm – I think I should have brought the new ones after all) gobbling Kendal Mintcake that was meant for emergencies and feeling like a fraud. I may look the part, but I'm distinctly uncertain that this enterprise will end up on my list of fifty activities for self improvement. Far from embarking on a great end-to-end adventure, I'm not at all sure I will make it past the first couple of days.

Penzance certainly has an end of Britain feel to it. There's nowhere further to go – just a big set of buffers and a very large PENZANCE sign to put the boot in on those who were travelling to Exeter but fell asleep at Yeovil. Outside is a grey sky, grey buildings, grey sea flecked with white horses. Welcome to Penzance! As I leave the station yard, it starts to rain heavily and I have to shelter in a shop doorway while I

struggle to put on my brand new waterproofs.

The route to the youth hostel seemed simplicity itself when I studied the book on the train. Walk though the town and turn right just past the YMCA building. What YMCA building? No sign of it. As shops and houses give way to open countryside, I figure I must have missed the turning and begin to retrace my steps. My God! Lost already, and I haven't even started.

Of course, I could ask somebody, but I've got this terrible thing about wanting to appear as if I know what I'm doing, even when I patently don't. It's a failing that has caused me to spend huge chunks of my time on this earth in fruitless activity and seething frustration as instruction books remain unread and advice stays unsought. Here I am, looking like a walker, dressed up in my walker's clothes. How can I fail to find my way around this piddling place?

I steal a furtive glance at the book and conclude that the sketch map must relate to a different Penzance from the one I'm in. But after a circular tour of the town and an embarrassed nod or two to locals who have watched me pass by three times, I stumble by chance on a sign directing me to the slightly worn but still impressive mansion that is the youth hostel.

My pleasure at successfully negotiating this first challenge is tempered by the presence of a school minibus and a coach in the car park. The warden reassures me: 'You won't hear them where you are,' but I'm less than convinced as I make my way to my room and a stream of animated little girls scamper past me down the stairs like lemmings on speed. The warden was right though. I neither hear nor see anything more of them. Whether what I witnessed was their migration to the nearest cliff, I'm not really sure.

There are four middle-aged Germans in my room and they already have their towels on the best beds. Honestly, I'm not making it up. We're talking major stereotype fulfilment here. Only the bunk by the door is free. I choose the lower bed, judging the upper one too squeaky. Bad move. Half an hour later the upper berth is occupied by a cyclist who will squeak the night away above my head. But to tell the truth, this is the least of the nocturnal disturbances. One of my roommates has a quite unbelievable snore. It starts up almost as soon as the light goes off, deep and gurgling, like an elephant blowing through its trunk into a bucket of blancmange. A few minutes later and we have a

duet. The second participant produces a short, sharp hurrumph perfectly timed at the end of each of the first performer's rumbles. And, yes, there's more – I become acutely aware that somebody is farting in his sleep. Just when I think things can't get any worse, a third snorer takes the stage. He utters a small sexual groan which works very nicely with the other two. I'm put in mind of the Singing Dogs – barked versions of 'Jingle Bells' and 'How Much Is That Doggy In The Window?' that topped the Christmas charts in the late fifties and early sixties. As a child I used to wonder what cruelty they inflicted on the creatures to get them to perform in that way. I didn't know much about the magic of sound editing in those days. In a vain attempt to silence tonight's singing dogs, I stuff my ears with damp toilet paper. Can't do anything about my nose, unfortunately.

I open my eyes at seven in the morning with one of those leaden headaches that point to a wholly inadequate night's sleep. Outside the rain is coming down in stair rods. I lie still, foetus-like. Am I seriously considering waddling off across the cliffs in this lot? What's the alternative? Sitting around in some steamy Penzance café? Certainly can't stick around here – they kick you out at ten. I join the gloomy parade into the washrooms and, with just a smidgen of vitality showered into my system, trail miserably down to breakfast.

I never, ever, eat a cooked breakfast at home, but this is an occasion where a bit of serious fuelling is called for. It's all the wrong stuff of course, but I wade into bacon sausage, eggs, beans, even fried bread, as if my very survival depends on it. My table-mate is a walker going in the opposite direction. My God! He looks so fit and young. I notice that he has eschewed the fatty garbage I'm consuming in favour of cereal and toast. He tells me it has taken him a week and a half to come from Clovelly and he thinks he has pushed it too hard. Hmmm – makes my hoped-for twenty miles a day look a shade optimistic. And he's using the trip as an opportunity to sort his life out. I listen politely as he enumerates the problems he has grappled with along the coastal path – failed relationships, unsatisfactory job, the pressures of urban life. Well I guess a cliff path is as good a place as any to deal with these issues. There is, after all, an on-hand solution if you reach the conclusion that life is no longer worth the effort. And what has he decided? A pretty literal dose of downshifting actually. Ten days on his own around this corner of Britain and he has resolved to give up his job,

move down to Cornwall and join the ranks of the tele-commuters. I'm slightly alarmed. If this is what ten days of lone walking does for you, what am I going to be like by the time I reach John O'Groats? Could be all set for a Trappist monastery.

I spin out breakfast on the pretext of gathering intelligence for my trip, but eventually there's nothing else for it. I have to make a move. Fortunately the rain has diminished to a light drizzle. I ask at reception about buses to Land's End, and am informed that there's a bus stop a quarter of a mile down the road, but the hostel's own bus departs from the front door in fifteen minutes. That will do for me – I scurry off to pack my rucksack.

What the hostel receptionist neglected to tell me was that this is most certainly not the express service to Land's End. In fact the journey starts in quite the wrong direction. The bus heads back into Penzance and stops for five minutes outside the railway station. Being back where I started the previous afternoon does nothing for my sense of progress. After that it's a meandering route around the peninsular, taking in such essential sights as Newlyn Harbour, the Merry Maidens Bronze Age Standing Stones, and The Minack Open Air Theatre at Porthcurno. All very interesting, but I'm anxious to get walking and I'm starting to feel a little travel sick on these winding lanes. My fellow passengers are up for the ride rather than the destination. There are three of them – a Swedish woman with her teenage daughter, and an elderly man from Shrewsbury who has spent the last thirty years tracing his Cornish ancestry and wants the rest of us to appreciate his knowledge of the county's history and legend. The Swedes provide a willing audience, although I'm not sure that, between his gabbled delivery and the noise of the engine, there's a great deal they are able to comprehend. But they display the correct body language and make all the right noises, so he is greatly encouraged. The driver, not to be outdone, joins in with gusto. So entranced are they all by the hotch-potch of fact, myth and complete nonsense they are able to weave together that, when we finally arrive at Land's End, I'm the only one who wants to get off. The rest remain on board, to complete the circular route back to Penzance.

Everyone I have spoken to says Land's End is horrible – utterly spoilt by the modern tourist complex. But it's not nearly as ghastly as I had expected. Sure, there's an air of theme park to it, but the

buildings are compact and low rise and most of the attractions are contained within them. There isn't the tackiness one finds in many of the country's tourist traps. I'm almost tempted to enter the 'Miles of Memories' exhibition which offers to let me experience the sights, the smells, the stories and some of the amazing modes of transport used by intrepid travellers between Land's End and John O'Groats. I'm fascinated by what the smells might be, but I reluctantly conclude it will delay my departure. Perhaps next time.

I wander into one of the shops. In my rush to get started I haven't yet picked up a map. My hand hovers over Sheet 102 in the Ordnance Survey Explorer Series. Nah! What's the point of a large scale map? I'll have walked off it by tomorrow. For the next hundred and eighty miles before I hit Exmoor all I need to do is keep the sea on my left. Can't go too wrong with that. I buy a general touring map of Cornwall and a guide to the Coastal Path. These, together with a large bar of nougat, should see me all right.

There's a notice at the main entrance to the complex inviting would-be end-to-enders to register at the post office. I'm again seized by doubt at the prospect. Will I make it to John O'Groats? Will my hip start to play up again? Have I made the right decision on boots? Does it count if you are planning to do the trip in stages. 'Don't be silly' I tell myself 'Making the commitment will be good for you.' I wander inside and, with as much casualness as I can muster, announce my intention to a counter clerk who looks a lot like Postman Pat's younger brother. He puts my name in a book and gives me a form which I must have authenticated at least six times along the way if I want the privilege of joining the End to End Club. As I'm already feeling acutely self-conscious about admitting what I'm up to, the prospect of queuing in half a dozen post offices across the country to have my form stamped doesn't sound immediately appealing. And the benefits that membership confers – a certificate, a newsletter, an end-to-ender's tie – don't strike me as prizes beyond measure.

Out on the cliff there's one final task before I depart – a photo, framed against an angry sky with the offshore rocks and the Longships lighthouse lurking in the lower background. There's a man who will do the job for you next to a signpost showing the distance to John O'Groats and various world cities. Into it, he will slot one for your home town. He can manage pretty well anywhere you want. I toy with

the idea of asking him to do Nome, Alaska for me, but conclude that this sort of thing isn't really my scene and opt instead for the self-timer device on my own camera.

I wonder if there is anybody in the world who manages to use these things successfully. I have never yet found a surface of suitable height and stability to frame the shot I wanted, and this occasion is no exception. Yes, I know you can buy mini tripods, but it's simpler to get someone to take the photo for you than carry one of those on the off-chance you might want to take a snap of yourself. After a lot of experimentation I finally find a spot on a low stone wall that is just about level and will get me in shot if I stand well back by the cliff edge. I set it up, walk carefully backwards and try to look suitably disinterested as the countdown timer flashes. A gust of wind causes the camera to wobble wildly and I rush to rescue it. I try again. This time it flashes for an age and I conclude I must have failed to set it properly. I walk forward and put my face two inches from the lens as the shutter goes. On the third attempt a couple of economy-sized inflatable tourists drift between me and the camera at the crucial moment. I give up and ask a passer-by to take my photo.

That's it. I'm ready to go. It's 11:30, I've wasted half the day and it looks like rain again, but I'm off on the longest walk of my life.