

ONE FOR THE ROAD

(a taster)



*being a poetic account of a
hitch-hiking & wild camping pilgrimage
around sacred places
and public houses
of the British Isles*

Stephen Hancock



www.pigandink.com

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Several summers ago I set off on a hitch-hiking and wild camping pilgrimage around sacred places and public houses of the British Isles.

After several attempts at writing the adventure up in prose form, I finally realised that it's yearning to be recorded in poems. So, with half a million prosaic words consigned to the creative compost heap, here I go...

I hope the little taster below gives you a flavour of what I'm up to.

Enjoy,

One Love,
Stephen

August 2024

*"The cure for anything is salt water:
sweat, tears or the sea."*

Isak Dinesen



Saint Sid of Corby

Just east of Northampton
(by the Lumbertubs roundabout on the A43)
you pull over for me and my outstretched thumb

I lug my rucksack up into your cab
and climb up and over and in
with almost childish excitement
(for lifts from lorries are nowadays so rare)

Five minutes into the journey
as if on an angel's nod or wink
you quickly cross-fade our conversation
over to that Deeper Stuff we wayfarers are always hungry for
and I feel that hitch-hiking glow
in my hitch-hiker's heart
at the meeting of two instantly comfortable strangers

"See that, Stephen," you say
pointing to the army of hairs on your forearm
now standing to attention as one

"That tells me something important is happening in here right now"

You drop me off just outside Corby
but as I climb down
you call me back up

"Stephen," you say
"If ever you find yourself
standing on the edge of something
you know you've got to do
but are dithering about doing it
just think of Sid
right behind you, mate
giving you a mighty royal kick up the arse"

Ah, Sid, many times over the years
I've remembered you and your words
(and blessed you and all that you love)
but until today
I've never dared redeem that promise that you made

but my dithering soul sure needs a mighty royal kick right now

Ah, good Sid
wherever you are
by the hairs on your arm
and the hairs on my arse
let your sweet boot swing, my friend
let your sweet boot swing



*“To be on the road
is to be home again.”*

St. Columba



No mud, no lotus

*Everyone knows we need to have mud for lotuses to grow.
The mud doesn't smell so good, but the lotus flower smells very good.
If you don't have mud, the lotus won't manifest.
You can't grow lotus flowers on marble.
Without mud, there can be no lotus.*

Thich Nhat Hanh
No Mud, No Lotus: The Art of Transforming Suffering



At the foot of the waterfall
I told Archie of my plans
to go on a hitch-hiking pilgrimage
around some of Britain's
sacred sites and holy places

Archie paused for a moment
and then simply added:

“And pubs!”

We both grinned in agreement
and a cool misty waterfall breeze
passed between us
and through us
and on its merry way

And then Archie proceeded to climb the waterfall
(because that’s the sort of thing that Archie does)

And thus the seed for this journey was planted:
A hitch-hiking and wild camping pilgrimage
around sacred places
and public houses
of the British Isles

The sacred and the profane
The temple and the church and the pub
Spirit and spirits and beer
The lotus *and* the mud



Once in a lifetime

All winter and spring I worked hard
Not in a show off kind of way
But I knew that my sweat and labour were noticed
It was the least I could do
Like paying some of my gratitude in advance

For adventures such as these are only granted to people like me
once in a lifetime
If at all

And although I was hungry to know what life was like
beyond my little patch of the county
Let alone travel to foreign lands!
I also knew that my family and my village were travelling with me
and that during the depths of winter
they would be expecting my fireside pilgrim tales

with eager ears and eyes

Once all the fields were planted
it was time for me to go
I felt as excited as a child on Christmas eve
and yet as fearful as I did on Hallowe'en

The day before I left
my grandmother presented me with a leather money belt
patterned with scallop shells
to wear under my tunic

She also showed me how to cut slits into the soles of my boots
and gave me some "emergency coins" to sew within
although she never once
mentioned the word
robbers

My whole family escorted me to the village bounds
My father even hugged me
which he'd never done before
"You'd better be back in time for harvest," he said

My little sister cried
but I promised I'd return with a special present for her
which made her smile

I won't forget

I only looked back once
and they were all still waving

I felt like a ship leaving harbour for the very first time
a vast and dizzying ocean before me

And even though my belly and my heart and my breath were all trembling
I could feel the weight of the coins in my boots
and somehow that weight felt like love
and protection
and strength
and hope
all rolled into one

Suddenly I felt like a giant
who could climb a hill in six or seven strides

And I found myself singing a song
I'd never heard sung before

and I felt the presence of the Lord
almost tangible beside me

"I am with you always," I could almost hear Him whispering
"Even to the ends of the earth."

And I laughed out loud
Because everything suddenly seemed so clear
and simple
and funny
and free



Eve of pilgrimage excitement

It's one of those exquisitely fresh and sunny mid-mornings in May
with more than a hint of summer in the edible blue sky
and I'm sitting on the back of my brother's mid-life Harley
as we rumble through Beckenham
bound south for the never-ending charms
of the M25

The sun's beaming directly into my be-goggled eyes
and I can feel eve-of-pilgrimage excitement
percolating through my hobo veins and brain
like a triple espresso
laced with a generous tippie of rum

Places names roll on by
forming a sort of poetry in motion
within my pillion mind:

*Beckenham, West Wickham
Addington, Forest Dale
Selsdon, Sanderstead
Harnsey Green...*

We snake down a surprisingly rural backroute
occasionally ambushed by wafts of hawthorn's sweet and spunky scent
before sliproading onto
the ouroboric London Orbital

Along arterial motorways and then vascular A-roads we cruise
occasionally riding through
shadow-dappled tunnels of luminous green
before squeezing through the capillaries of Marlborough town
with its oh-so-familiar privileged public schoolboys
and their privileged public schoolboy stride

*... Marlborough, Manaton
Fyfield, West Overton...*

Turning right onto the West Kennet Avenue
we pass between two guardian megaliths
overtake a woman on a mobility scooter
(who's hurtling along at an impressive rate of knots)
and then for a few hundred yards we sail alongside
the ancient avenue of paired standing stones

Ah
you can sense Avebury approaching before you reach it
just like you can sense the sea
before you actually glimpse it

And then there she blows!
The southern entrance to quite probably
the largest megalithic stone circle
in the whole wide world

The sacrilegious road carries us through the outer henge
and over the inner ditch
and into the giant stone circle
which once contained two inner stone circles
which once encircled
(so the old man in the old Antiques Shop once told me)
a megalithic phallus and a megalithic vulva

Penetrating circles within circles within circles
we coast into the car park of the Red Lion
which proudly (and quite rightly) proclaims itself to be
"the only pub in the world inside a stone circle"

The early summer starting point
and
(all goes well)
the late summer finishing point
of this hare-and-tortoise-brained
pilgrimage
adventure



*if these stones could speak
oh the stories they would tell
once upon a time*



Windmill Hill

Much later
as dusk cross-fades into blue-black night
I follow a meandering path through darkening meadows overflowing with
thousands upon thousands of buttercups
and dandelion clocks tightly wound and fit to burst

and then
slowly she rises upon the horizon
a gentle swelling of land
with three visible mounds on top
and a Venus-tipped crescent moon
setting directly above her:

Windmill Hill

I pitch my tent atop one of the mounds
improvise some barefoot evening prayers of gratitude
and then raise my hip flask of single malt
to the slender, waxing moon

Whisky gently glugs through the night air
and spills into the earth below
"To the ancestors!"
I declare out loud
just so that they know that this one's for them

Dad used to baulk at this alcoholic ceremony of mine
“That’s a waste of good whisky, Stevie-boy,” he’d say

“I hope you appreciate it now,” I whisper
pouring him an extra, gratuitous glug

Then I neck a slug of the old fire water myself
and follow its course down my gullet
until it hits my stomach
where it explodes into a fiery whisky-cloud
which rapidly blooms through my body and being and brain

Overhead The Plough is now furrowing the night
and the Milky Way has come out to dance
and another planet is rising from the east
– Jupiter, perhaps?

Ah
I suddenly feel pleasantly knackered
and quietly blessed to boot
(which sure ain’t a bad way to end any day)

I climb inside my faithful tent
zip shut both its doors
caterpillar down into my old sleeping bag lover
and soon dissolve into
dreamy Windmill Hilltop slumber...



*at the still centre
of this ancient stone circle
a barmaid pulls pints*



Avebury

During the war, he said
we lived like kings and queens
upon the land

The fields were full
the hedgerows ripe with berries
the rabbits fat
and easy to catch

And an endless summer
barely scathed by war
bloomed and blossomed within my mind

He was a proper English pagan
gent he was:
courteous
mischievous
kind



*the longest journey
begins with a single thumb
begging for a lift*



Venford Reservoir (Bosh! Mix)

Three rather plump Dartmoor lambs
possessed by the local reservoir sprites
(or perhaps the surplus energy of the season)

are racing and chasing around the car park at dusk
head-butting and bum-butting
and lamb-leaping and lamb-jumping
with such uncontainable and boistrous delight
that my heart can't help but smile

They all suddenly stop

And look at one another

as if temporarily overwhelmed
by playful possibility and hormonal wonder

(or maybe they're playing tag
but have forgotten which one of them's "it"?)

Bosh!

a head-butt instantly rekindles the game
racing and chasing around the car park
like three rather plump Dartmoor lambs
possessed by the local reservoir sprites
and the surplus
joy
of the season



Scorhill

*"The true miracle is not walking on water
or walking in air,
but simply walking on this earth."*
Thich Nhat Hanh

•

Lying on my back
on the middle of Teign-e-ver clapper bridge
under this vast and open Dartmoor sky
surrounded by these vast and rising hills
a slighty dizzying, almost timeless peace arises

•

Lowering my body

through the Tolmen stone
above the gently chuckling Teign
I imagine my life as a thread
now for ever stitched into
this particular tapestry
and trinity
of earth and rock and river

•

I feel so profoundly at home
lying down at the centre
of these Scorhill stones

When
(inevitably)
I pop my crocs and cease
pray, bury me here
beneath a barrel of beer
and I'll happily rot in peace

•

One of the local wild cows
is now grooving and grinding its body
up and down and all around
one of the sturdy
triangular stones
a glimpse of neopagan, neolithic
bovine itch-scratch-blis



*unzipping my tent
a dozen bullocks greet me
sweet scent of their breath*



Wistman's Wood

Come to Wistman's Wood
of an evening
in late May or early June
when the sun is still travelling bright
above the darkening flanks of Beardown Hill

when the robin and chaffinch and the wren
are weaving their evening taunts and tunes
through the slowly dampening, evening air

and sit upon a nearby rock

and gaze a while
upon and through these
backlit, sunlit, tangled trees
branches wrapped with rich and mossy cloth
and draped with silver-green wisps and tails of lichen

and let your body rest a while

and be gently charmed by this
ancient, oaken, emerald wonder

and yet
if you linger a little while longer
(and as the sun begins its descent down under)
perhaps you'll also sense
within Wistman's warp and weft
an ancient sadness too

a glimpse of this land, perhaps
before the first Mesolithic axe
began our brutal, human claim

no wonder the medicine here is so strong

for this is a place to remember
long-forgotten songs



Pilgrim's progress

Just put one foot
in front of the other

Leave all fancy
angelic-apparition-beatific-vision-instant-bolt-of-enlightenment
hopes and plans and dreams behind

Instead
pray constantly
that sore twinge
on the bottom of your big toe
doesn't rub itself into a blister

Trust the path before you
and if you believe in God
trust God
otherwise
trust your legs

Trust the path
trust your knees
trust your feet
trust your toes
trust your soles

No fancy pants
no fancy plans
just one pilgrim foot
in front of the other pilgrim foot
and then that one in front of the other

And when you ease into your wayfarer's bed
at the end of another well-trod day
let your aching salty faithful body
softly open
its pilgrim belly
and to the snoring rafters raise
exhausted hymns of gratitude
and silent songs of praise



Song of the Meadow Troll

I'M A MEADOW TROLL I'M A MEADOW TROLL
I'M A MEADOW TROLL I'M A MEADOW TROLL
I'M A MEADOW TROLL I'M A MEADOW TROLL
I'M A MEA
DOW
TROLL

I'M A MEADOW TROLL I'M A MEADOW TROLL
I'M A MEADOW TROLL I'M A MEADOW TROLL
I'M A MEADOW TROLL I'M A MEADOW TROLL
I'M A MEA
DOW
TROLL

I'M A MEADOW TROLL I'M A MEADOW TROLL
I'M A MEADOW TROLL I'M A MEADOW TROLL
I'M A MEADOW TROLL I'M A MEADOW TROLL
I'M A MEA
DOW
TROLL

I'M A MEADOW TROLL I'M A MEADOW TROLL
I'M A MEADOW TROLL I'M A MEADOW TROLL
I'M A MEADOW TROLL I'M A MEADOW TROLL
I'M A MEA
DOW
TROLL



*beneath this old oak
a rat pauses by my feet
a meeting of eyes*

The Realm of the Beggar King

When there are no keys in your pocket
and no cares on your mind
When you don't know the day
and you don't know the time
When the sun's your only compass
and the moon's your only lover
When the stars are your ceiling
or a yew tree is your cover
When you envy no creature
except the bird on the wing
Then you know you're at the helm
of that liminal realm:
the realm of the beggar
king

When your sweat smells of vinegar
and your underwear smells of cheese
When there are outbreaks of mutiny
among the regiments of your knees
When that blister on your sole
begins to slip and to slide
When you've been standing three hours or more
but still ain't got a ride
When your belly begins to growl
and your boots begin to ring
Then you know you're at the helm
of that liminal realm:
the realm of the beggar
king

When you're in a foreign land
yet feel totally at home
When the sunlight on the mountainside
thrills you to the bone
When that complete stranger at the wheel
feels as easy as a friend
When you've pitched your tent on a western shore
and don't want the day to end
When the dawn chorus wakes you up
and makes you want to sing
Then you know you're at the helm
of that liminal realm:
the realm of the beggar
king

When some boy racer's just given you the finger
or some snotty brats have given you the thumb
When you're tempted to hurl curses back
When your faith in life's gone numb
When you daydream of past glories
and fear you've lost the knack
When you wonder why you keep on doing this shit
but there ain't no turning back
When all the spiritual tomes you've ever read
no longer mean a thing
Then you know you're at the helm
of that liminal realm:
the realm of the beggar
king

When you're in the middle of nowhere
yet in the scheme of things
When the hobo angels by your side
are pulling all the strings
When you've remembered the rules of thumb
and life is but a game
When that vehicle on the horizon
is calling out your name
When that old red Porsche has just pulled over
or that family of four has squeezed you in
Then you know you're at the helm
of that liminal realm:
the realm of the beggar
king



Hobo poet

Hobo poet worships the spirits of the hedge
a dry ditch makes the perfect bed
he does not judge the weeds
but often envies the nimble excitement of the bees

Hobo poet knows the long loneliness
drinks from forgotten springs and wells

pleasures himself amid the hawthorn
cries blue moon tears on the shoulder of a stoical oak

Hobo poet feels at ease
in the strangest of places
wakes up besides a silent sea
breathes in life's airs and graces

Hobo poet pockets abandoned words

Hobo poet silently skirts any fearful town
lest the townsfolk accuse him of stealing their dreams
and put him in the stocks
as a warning to their children

Hobo poet dares the young boy with the faraway gaze
to join him on an adventure

Hobo poet remembers and then forgets he smells
would give all he owns to touch a pretty woman's pretty skin

Hobo poet dries his socks upon the brambles
and rubs his fingers between his toes
till the raw gaps peel and gleam

Hobo poet bimbles
as aimlessly as a lazy cloud
and when he is sure that nobody can hear him
sings bashfully to God

Hobo poet leaves his hobo mark
on the lintel of every kindness

Hobo poet knows not to argue with ghosts

Hobo poet often dreams of home

Wakes

Moves on





If you'd like to follow me on my journey:
Facebook: **Stephen Hancock / Pig & Ink**

www.pigandink.com/contact