

Gregor's Blog

Day 1 – Portpatrick to New Luce – 22.5 miles

Well! We couldn't have asked for a nicer day, setting off on glorious sunshine from Portpatrick harbour and really never losing sight of the sun all day till we ended up at New Luce. We had a willing band of fellow walkers including teams from SP Energy Networks, Davidson and Robertson, Tarff Valley, RPID Ayr and SAC Stranraer. A huge special mention to the man who inspired me to do this 21 years ago, the irrepressible Arthur Anderson joining in once again alongside another giant of Scottish agricultural journalism, Fordyce Maxwell. Big thanks to John and Jean Ross for hospitality en route and to our fantastic hosts this evening Janet and Neale McQuistin, who even gave us a sneak preview for Scot Sheep, good luck tomorrow guys! Thanks to Scot sheep's hosts, Robert and Carolyn Dalrymple for their very generous sponsorship.

I'm tempted to say Day 1 was incident free but that would be a little white lie. Yes, David Rafter and I took a wrong turn near Castle Kennedy so walked a buckshee couple of miles into the bargain, ouch. Yes, we did have a map kindly provided by Davidson & Robertson but no we didn't consult it when it really mattered. Oops!

Day one in!

Day 2 - New Luce to Bargrennan – 17.5 miles

A small but elite bunch of walkers with Andrew and me today. Fordyce Maxwell again, Gregor McMillan from RPID and teams from Tarff plus D & R with Polly the spaniel. Great company and it makes so much of a difference having company, and pets!

Uphill, but out in the fields to start. Another beautiful sunny day and once we got out through the trees some spectacular views over the moors, similarly on the last few miles from Knowe village down to Bargrennan. Scotland is such a beautiful place!

Overnight tonight at Bargrennan, only one slight problem, there was a wee shower of rain and it brought out midges in quantities you would not believe!

Day 3 - Bargrennan to St John's town of Dalry – 22 miles

I'm tempted to say Day 3 Log, after coming out of Glentroll you realise just how much activity is going on in the Galloway forest, diggers, timber trucks and literally miles and miles of top quality gravel roads. From Loch Trool out to Loch Dee and then onto Clatteringshaws it struck me as ironic that what must once have been some of the most remote sheep farming county in the south west has now been opened up to artics.

A great day walking with friends from D&R, loads of SPEN guys, Ros McNally and Michael Burns from RPID and a Tarff team. Steven Ritchie and I walked miles together and had a blast. Great to see Janet Robertson and Kirsten Henry down from Ayrshire.

Cuckoo's calling all the way round and glorious sunshine later on. Being 100% honest though, despite the marvellous vistas, miles and miles of dusty gravel forest roads are hard going so meeting Jill Sloan with water supplies at Clatteringshaws and then the green fields back to Dalry were very welcome. Andrew marched on ahead and finished among the first group, I brought up the rear. 2 out of 3 days like that, there seems to be a pattern developing here.....

Chatting to Kirsten over dinner reminded me of a wee aspect to my story that I haven't shared with anyone outwith RPID. Kirsten's Uncle Willie, Willie MacGregor, was the best boss I ever had. I knew him from my first day with the Department and he was a huge influence on my career. A truly genuine and hugely respected leader. When Arthur did his first walk in 1997 Willie encouraged us all to participate and to support the event, but I missed it then, and have always

regretted it. So as well as Arthur's inspiration I am dedicating this walk to the memory of a true friend and colleague, our Chief Agricultural Officer, the late Willie MacGregor.

Feet, ankles, knees all seem to be holding up so looking forward to a big 26 mile day tomorrow. Doing the maths that's 25% of the days and 30% of the miles under our belts so far. Thanks to all of our supporters, especially our host for the evening, Andrew Hunter-Blair.

Day 4 - St John's Town of Dalry to Sanquhar – 26 miles

Well, weather report first, the forecast was for thundery rain at about 4 o'clock and, yes, it was absolutely correct. Down it came with 8 miles to walk. A wee nervous moment as we considered the consequences of walking poles in a lightning storm, but common sense prevailed - they are only carbon fibre or aluminium.

26 miles today, and if I'm honest, a tough one. Great walking conditions on mostly grassy hills, and some spectacular views from the tops, but still 4 miles more than yesterday and the longest distance I have ever walked in one day.

Walking on mossy or grassy ground is easier on the feet than hard roads but there were a few steep climbs. Character building stuff! Several times today I was having to remind myself to dig in and that we are doing this for a very good cause.

Andrew and I had great support again today from the D&R, Tarff and SPEN teams as well as Mike Parker for SASA and Yvonne Goodwin and Paul Speirs from RPID. Thanks guys, your company and good humour on a tough day were much appreciated. Jill is a logistical genius and again spent a long day keeping the show on the road for RSABI with water supplies and counting everyone home.

Walking most of the way with Mike we remembered our late friend and colleague, Roy McLachlan who we'd known as far back as playing football at East of Scotland Agricultural College. Like us, Roy's roots were in the South West so today is dedicated to his memory.

Huge thanks to our super hospitable hosts for this evening, Lorna and Douglas Greenshields.

Day 5 - Sanquhar to Wanlockhead – 8 miles

Lovely part of the Way, and only 8 miles, a steep climb out of town but overall a breeze!

An inspiring group of 14 walkers with Andrew and I today including the customary great support from team D&R, with Andrew Greenshields guesting and team Tarff for whom Scott and Harry Gallagher were the real pacesetters. Over the hill and up the Glen littered will lead mining relics. What a hard life those miners and smelters must have had, high up in the hills processing what is essentially a toxic heavy metal.

Then a gentle climb into town to be met by an impressive vintage tractor run from the Ayrshire Vintage Tractor and Machinery Club. It just reminded me what superb supporters AVTMC are to RSABI when they whipped out another totally unexpected but very generous cheque. Thanks for the support guys, thoroughly enjoyed seeing you.

Heavy rain forecast for 2 pm. Barbeque planned for 2pm so what are the chances of dodging the downpour in Scotland's highest village? Nil it seems and yes, the inevitable happened but no way did it spoil any enjoyment as team Caldwell grilled burgers they'd brought for everyone under the RSABI gazebo.

A totally different day, and very relaxing with all those friends and my family around. Yet another reminder that although it's my feet taking the steps I'm lucky to be supported and encouraged by a much bigger team. I thoroughly enjoyed walking a fair bit of the way with a fellow RSABI volunteer - the ploughing marathon legend that is Collin Dodds and his friend Lisa Done.

Great and varied day, batteries recharged, back to long distance walking tomorrow. We are RSABI!

Day 6 - Wanlockhead to Beattock – 20 miles

A nice but also, in the common parlance, challenging section. I now know why the guide book says it's not for the faint hearted. Should have been obvious really, when you start at Scotland's highest village and climb straight up it's not going to be a cakewalk.

Up into the mist for a visit to the golf ball radar station that I've seen from the A76 many times, then a series of steep up and downs in the Lowther hills. Then suddenly, out of nowhere on a forestry track we came across the SUW halfway point marker- what a morale booster!

On to the Daer reservoir, up and down a bit more through some more trees, over to Beattock.

A brisk walk in great company, supported today by team D&R, team SPEN and an RPID team of Angus, Allan, Kasia and Gillian. We were all pretty much led along the way by the electric enthusiasm of Jimmy Warnock taking a day off from being Chairman of the Royal Highland Agricultural Society. It was also nice to see Collin Dodds again giving up the second day of his weekend to walk with us. It's the support and camaraderie of all these new friends which keep us going. Today reached a new level as 12 of us walked round as a group for the whole way. Excellent teamwork.

Wandering through the high hills Allan got me thinking about the generations of hill shepherds who would have walked these hills. Trees and wind farms have changed the landscape and quad bikes have changed the methods.

Damp and overcast today, so that only means one thing - midges! Keep moving! Andrew and I are being very well looked after yet again this evening, a big thank you to our hosts Jim and Pamela Samson.

Day 7 - Beattock to St Mary's Loch – 21 miles

A dry start today till we got out of town and up into the trees but it soon turned dull and drizzly. No less enjoyable though and it turned out to be a varied and interesting walk today.

Andrew and I have constantly remarked about how encouraging it is to meet new friends and all the people who have supported us by walking a stage and today was no exception. Team Tarff of Fraser Morrison and Scott Nicholson, Team farmer of Sheena Horner (Galloway Chillies) and Kate Rowell, Team D&R of Alison Aitken and Jenny Baillie and Ian Johnston from SPEN were great company on a tough 21 mile stage. Thanks and well done guys, you were all a credit to yourselves and to your companies. But a special mention has to go to Garry Cameron also from SPEN for his fascinating insights, local knowledge and the confidence it inspired knowing we had a member of the Moffat mountain rescue team on board. A true gent, every team should have a Garry!

Several highlights for me today, including the walk down the Ettrick valley, few sheep now but famous nevertheless. Stone built circular sheep stells have stood the test of time even though it's many years since they were used. Also what a pleasure having a wee chat with a couple of farmers, Wendy Hyslop right at the start and Tommy Hepburn away over at St Mary's loch. It made the day complete. Tommy confirmed what I already knew, that it's been a tough job farming Cheviot sheep in the high hills this last winter, but his stock are looking great now. I have total respect for these guys doing much more than just a day job.

In terms of the natural world it can't get any better than seeing a peregrine falcon swooping after but narrowly missing a pigeon down a steep glen, then seeing the same falcon mobbing a red kite.

June 4th, it's my mum's birthday today. As we trekked through the hills I had a think about my late dad too and the values I learned from him. The most honest man I ever met, he was the voice

of reason and always looked out for his farming neighbours. As the modern world gathers pace we should all remind ourselves do that.

Today was the last of the really long walks so I'm not quite sure what to expect from here to the coast but looking forward to it immensely.

Day 8 - St Mary's Loch to Traquair -12 miles

A very pleasant walk today in the sunshine on a nice grassy path for most of the way. It's a pity to see that the famous Tibbie Shiels Inn is now closed but the starting point along St Mary's Loch was a very nice, level start.

We had a big group of walkers with us again so thanks to Jim from Tarff, Brian from RPID Hamilton, Team D&R and big RPID teams from Dumfries and Galashiels. Special mention too for Andrew's mum, Mary Dunlop, for doing a second stint with us. As always, the support gives us a real lift.

My colleague and Andrew's nephew, Aitken Swan, also joined us so it was nice to see team Leggate having a wee blether.

The views of the Borders hills were inspiring today, in a productive hill cattle and sheep farming landscape. Only 12 miles on this leg of the route so we had a bit more time to savour what was going on around us. I can highly recommend sitting at the top of a grassy hill with the wind in your hair in the sunshine, looking down the valley at sheep grazing contentedly and listening to the Skylarks. There can't be many better ways to dissipate stress.

As always, one of my highlights was the opportunity to chat with friends old and new. James Pattinson gave me my thought for today when he said that when you have to spend time away from your family it makes you appreciate what you have at home. Indeed! To paraphrase Bill Shankly, people aren't the most important thing, they are the only thing.

We are well through the route now, and building a real sense of momentum. It really feels as if we are heading along the final straight and I am looking forward to heading for Galashiels tomorrow.

Andrew and I are especially grateful to our host for this evening, Catherine Maxwell-Stuart, supporting RSABI and looking after us extremely well in Traquair House. What a beautiful location, and well worth a visit.

Day 9 - Traquair to Galashiels – 13 miles

We saw the Borders at their best today in strong sunshine. A small but elite band of fellow walkers assembled at Traquair village hall and set off in what turned out to be a speedy and a slower group. Andrew set off, as he does, at a heck of a pace to lead from the front with Poppy, Lynsey, Tim and Otto the dog from team D&R. I brought up the rear with my old school pals Jim and Angus who came all the way through from Ayr to support me in a day's walking

A really nice walk, only 13 miles and quite varied through forests and on hill tops surrounded by skylarks then down through green pastures back into Galashiels. The views over the town and back to Innerleithen and Walkerburn are quite spectacular.

Some very interesting cairns on the hill tops. According to Andrew Dunlop who walked up to meet us there are coins hidden in caches for walkers to pick up all along the Way. Now he tells me!

We are being hosted tonight by Nigel Miller and Joyce who deserve a big thank you for taking time out of a busy farming schedule and for their hospitality. Nigel took part in a stage of Arthur's walk 21 years ago so it all adds to the sense of history and tradition about what we are doing. I hope

that there is maybe an energetic person out there who might consider picking up the baton for RSABI on the Southern Upland Way some years from now?

In the late evening sunshine it's hard to believe that the sheep in this area suffered so badly from a bitter east wind and heavy snowfalls only a few weeks ago.

Day 10 - Galashiels to Lauder – 12 miles

A really nice walk today. Setting off out of town, the Way heads through Tweedbank, along the Tweed with views of Abbotsford House, down to Melrose then over the river, up the hill and over the moor to end at Lauder. Wall to wall sunshine and more of those spectacular wide panoramic views of the Borders hills and valleys which we have become accustomed to this week. Looking back over my shoulder the Eildon Hills shone in the sunshine.

As I was walking quietly on my own for a short time along a long moorland stretch of farm track listening to the songs of the skylarks it felt like a very enjoyable thing to do in the sunshine. Refreshment for the soul!

We saw more cattle today than on any previous section. Big, well-built cows and their calves grazing contentedly in the sunshine, lazily watched us pass by. All in fine condition and a reminder that this is a working landscape where professional farmers take great pride in their livestock. RSABI take pride in our farmers.

Our enthusiastic band of fellow walkers today comprised Fordyce Maxwell joining us for a third time, Rhona Booth, Lynn Dandie and Hollie Kirkwood from team Davidson and Robertson, David MacDonnel and Rollo the dog from Tarff, Jill McGregor, Alison Mitchell from team McGregor, Laura Bell and Richard Forsyth from NFU Mutual and my colleagues Elinor Mitchell and Calum Main from Scotgov. All completing their own personal challenge, giving us support, sharing the experience, spreading the RSABI message and making new friends. Rollo certainly did!

We are both very grateful to our hosts this evening, Patricia and Angus Glennie for welcoming us into their home and taking care of us.

Day 11 - Lauder to Longformacus – 15 miles

Once again a top notch team joined us for a day's walking. Steph Adams, George Hipwell, Rhona Hipwell and Fiona Paul representing team D&R, Calum Main from RPID, Arthur Anderson, Fordyce Maxwell and Nina Clancy from team RSABI. A real pleasure also to be joined for a wee while by Patricia Glennie.

It was a different kind of walk today. A nice walk out of town, over the Leader Water and through grassy fields before climbing up into the hills. Then miles and miles of paths and tracks across the heather moors. That was a really different experience for this week, we hadn't seen much heather before. There were peewits and curlews in abundance, and a couple of grouse. Many more would have been hiding in the heather. As usual the views were spectacular, including the Eildons in the far distance.

Then a mystery. We came up to the high point at the Twin Law cairns where a well-wisher had left us a gas stove, tea, coffee, biscuits and some very nice sloe gin. What a pleasant surprise. Sunshine, sloe gin and stunning views, sublime!

I walked for a while with my RSABI 'boss' Nina, who had joined us for the day. It was good to hear some of her thinking for the future and trying to predict what might happen over the next few years. If the demand for our help increases it's all the more important that we keep fundraising. The supporter scheme is going well and at only £25 per annum it's a very cost effective way for individuals to show their support.

All around us there were reminders that this is another managed working landscape with grit laid out for the grouse, regularly burnt heather and well maintained butts all around. As we were striding purposefully down off the moor we were following in the footsteps of Victorian shooting parties. Maybe I could have been one of those well-heeled gentlemen? Probably not, maybe a beater?

In the company of Arthur and Fordyce sharing wisecracks and stories, we headed down past Scarlaw, the Watch Water reservoir and the famous Rawburn farm to cross today's finishing line at Longformacus.

Andrew and I are being very well looked after by our hosts tonight, Janet and John Hodge. Janet has walked most of the SUW at some time and had been along walking at New Luce for a day with Arthur 21 years ago. There have been so many echoes down through the years. Last day tomorrow! 17.5

Day 12 - Longformacus to Cockburnspath – 17.5 miles

I had real mixed emotions at the starting line this morning, looking forward and thinking back at the same time. So very different from the adrenaline rush and trepidation at Portpatrick last Tuesday. It didn't last long though, it was no time for deep thinking as our final gang assembled and headed out on the trail. It was nice of Reston JAC to support us at the start.

We have been charmed and entertained all week by our fellow walkers and today was no exception. We shared several laughs and stories with a real friendly group comprising Nina Clancy, Lorraine Caven, Kirsty Macaskill and Cara Sloan from team RSABI, Andrew Scott and Fergus Thomson from team D&R, Callum Main from RPID and a thoroughly entertaining group of Arbroath walkers, Gordon and Anne Henderson, Isabelle Reid and Alison Reid.

Then of course with us today also were our stalwarts Arthur Anderson and Fordyce Maxwell along with Ewan Pate in his role as RSABI chairman. Walking a mile or so with Ewan reminded me of how much I enjoy his well-balanced agricultural journalism and what safe hands RSABI are in. Fordyce has been our support walker in chief completing an impressive 5 stages at either end, Arthur joined Calum Main with a highly creditable 3 each. We enjoyed your company gents. Thank you.

It was a really varied walk today which started in a leafy lane, climbed up into the hills and on through grassy pastures to Abbey St Bathans. In the high up fields we frightened a hare, not uncommon but surprisingly the first I'd seen this week. Plenty of great quality cattle all around us and a few signs reminding us to treat them with respect, especially when they have young calves. I noticed quite a few people gathering sheep for clipping, they'll be glad to get out of their winter fleeces in this hot weather!

Then a lengthy stretch of field and woodland walk till we had to sprint across the busy A1, I always knew that those high viz vests that SPEN had supplied us all with would come in handy. Safely across we turned onto a bridge over the East coast main line railway and into another very pleasant woodland with birds singing all around us. A few ups and downs and then down through a few sets of wooden steps to hit the coast at Pease Bay. That's not quite the finish though as the trail runs along the coast, takes a funny little loop and tunnels under the A1 and railway again to come to the real end at Cockburnspath. A very welcoming little crowd welcomed the walkers in with Jill and Andrew holding up a tape for us to burst through right on the finishing line. I think I managed to jog a few steps at the end. Then we were all whisked off for another very welcome BBQ hosted by another RSABI stalwart, Johnny Watson.

And so it ended.

The stats read OK I think: 2 men, 12 days, 212 miles, 140 walkers and immeasurable goodwill.

I set myself a challenging target and exceeded it. It has been a physically and spiritually uplifting experience and I'm feeling stronger for completing it. I've learned that I can walk for long

distances without suffering, and also that I can throw some words together when required, although I have to say that was humbling to receive praise for this little blog from Fordyce Maxwell who I regard as one of Scotland's best and most entertaining agricultural writers.

Andrew and I have formed a bond over the 12 days and shared the experience. If we ever had any doubts about what we were doing they were blown away on minute one of day one and subsequently at every step of the way as our army of supporters promoted the RSABI cause.

Several people asked me what the highlight of the walk had been. There were many; we've seen some of Scotland's best known and most scenic hills, glens and lochs at their best. Forests, fields, and farmland for miles and miles. Wide open landscapes. Historic houses and landmarks juxtaposed with modern art. Livestock grazing contentedly and wildlife in abundance. Saw a few cuckoos and heard even more. Working landscapes, where modern forestry and agriculture coexist with reminders of farming and mining from days gone by. We walked on new forest tracks and ancient drove roads with stunning views all around.

But there is really only one contender as the highlight - the people. We have been joined by over 140 individual walkers including friends old and new. There has been an overwhelming sense of goodwill from companies and individuals wanting to support a great cause. They picked us up each day, kept us motivated and delivered encouragement exactly when it was needed. Arthur joining as at the start and the finish was poignant, as was the company of the small group of people, including Fordyce, doing a part of this second time round, 21 years on. Jill Sloan put her life on hold for 2 weeks to ferry us around and to organise logistics from dawn till dusk. People invited us into their homes and treated us like VIPs. #GregorsWAY18 has been a massive team effort. Thank you all.

There's one final thing. Please don't call what I've just done a challenge. OK, it was a long walk but I'm fortunate to be physically fit and I had a big team around me offering a huge amount of support in every sense of the word. The real challenge is for hard working people facing up to tough times and everything that life throws at them. Make sure you let them know there's a helping hand out there.

We are RSABI! - Supporting People in Scottish Agriculture