

It was with some disappointment that, as I drove towards Eastbourne on what had been quite a pleasant morning, I spotted distant Beachy Head in a great pall of fog.

To be fair, the forecast had included the possibility of isolated fog/mist patches in some coastal areas. Nevertheless, it was pleasing to find what eventually turned out to be sixteen walkers at the start (some late-comers) for the two distances.

It was a mixed bag of walkers from Kent, Sussex and London Groups and eleven of us (two stayed to wait for the late-comers) set off undaunted into the fog. On this occasion Yours Truly was standing in for Graham Smith, the usual leader on this regular Good Friday twenty-six miler (Joy Davies, of course, leading the twenty-miler)

It took me no time at all to blot my copy-book and lead us astray as we drifted off line in the (by now) mist. After discussion with Andy, a local Sussex Group member, we finished up taking an alternative route to Birling Gap and missing Beachy Head (usually the first feature) completely. It didn't really matter as there was no fine sea-view to be had from the cliff-top. After the view-less Seven Sisters, we entered the Cuckmere valley, where the mist was a lot thinner, and stopped for elevenses beside one of the lagoons, as usual. We were soon joined by the "later" party, five I believe, who were joined by two of our number and then taken by Joy on the remainder of the twenty-mile route.

The remaining nine of us then pressed on with the twenty-six miler. Our usual route from there, via Exceat Bridge, is to take a path on the eastern rim of Seaford and thence loop out to join the main South Downs escarpment at the Bopeep car park. This would be followed by a 1.5-mile detour to the top of Firle Beacon, an excellent viewpoint. Sadly, the Seaford path has become too popular with dog-walkers and, consequently, unpleasant to walk, in parts; so, an alternative was used. We climbed out of the Cuckmere valley from the new bridge near Litlington and eventually joined our usual loop route. At Bopeep, we decided to abandon the detour to Firle Beacon – pointless in the visibility – and turned back, on the South Downs Way, to Alfriston for lunch at one of the three pubs there (forget the name).

After lunch, it was along the river again, for a bit, then across the fields to Milton Street and a longish climb back up onto the downs. From the top, we'd normally leave the South Downs Way and take a route along the northern perimeter of the downs, giving fine views to the north. Once again the poor visibility made this pointless, so we continued on the S.D.W. Soon Yours Truly made another blunder (blaming the mist, of course!). I took the wrong option at a fork and, consequently, led us all the way back to Litlington. So, out came the maps and my error was confirmed. Unfortunately, we'd strayed two miles off route and the only option was to retrace our steps back to the fork.

The group were remarkably cheery and optimistic (and forgiving!), despite the tiredness now setting in and the obvious lack of reward (views). We pressed on through the mist for the remainder of our walk, which went without incident, fortunately. Despite some route cuts, on the day, we probably walked more than the twenty-six miles, in all. It was considered expedient (and, probably, diplomatic) to miss out our usual second pub stop which would have been at the Eight Bells at Jevington.

I have to thank all those on the twenty-six mile route for their tolerance and understanding of their leader's (at times) erratic route-making but everyone, nevertheless, seemed to have enjoyed the walk. An adventure!

Mike Pursey