

THE MILLENNIUM WAY

A presentation by Barry Durman about the 100 mile trail through the Heart of England known as The Millennium Way

Tuesday 17th September in the Tom Hauley Room



Barry commenced his talk with the story behind the formation of The Millennium Way, by telling us it was the brainchild of engineer/businessman Chris Tayler. Following a mini stroke in 1998 he decided he should ease up a little and have Wednesdays off work for walking in the countryside. He invited a few friends to join him from the 41 Club – this is an organisation formed by ex-Round Tablers who, being obliged to leave that club at the age of 40, formed another club where you had to be 41 years of age to join. There are now 24,000 members worldwide and last year Barry was the international chairman and travelled the world to visit some of them.

The group have been walking every single Wednesday since 1998 (Christmas Day and Covid apart). It was felt that it would be good to create a long distance walk in the Midlands, as there is a marked lack of them in this part of the world. It was decided to make it a 100 mile trail and, as the new millennium was two years away, they decided to call it The Millennium Way and launch it in the year 2000. They settled on a 'V' shaped trail, centred on Meriden (the traditional centre of England), running from Pershore in Worcestershire to Middleton Cheney in Northamptonshire.

They approached the Ramblers Association about the project who informed them that, as their members were ageing, they wanted shorter walks rather than long distance ones so it was decided to create 44 circular walks, of varying lengths, all along the main route – Barry described it as being similar to a necklace.

Realising they would need a lot of assistance they contacted all the 41 clubs along the route and asked for seven or eight members from each club to help to plan all the walks.

The walks have instructions that are considered second to none and Barry defied anyone to get lost – providing they followed the instructions that is. Most of them start from a pub or café and they range from three to ten miles in length with one being labeled 'easy access'. Moreover, if you completed every circular walk, you would have covered every inch of The Millennium Way and walked a total of 267 miles.

Having decided to create a walk they then found they had to deal with the officials of the five different counties that the path runs through, Worcestershire,

Warwickshire, Solihull, Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire, in order to establish it as a recognised route. The walk took three years of planning using only existing footpaths – not a single path had to be created and it was completed just in time to meet the millennium deadline.

Additionally, all the walks required monitoring, so the local 41 clubs in the area were asked to provide seven or eight people so that each walk could have a designated warden to keep it free of brambles or obstructions and checking stiles, etc. Barry explained that he became involved with the project when he agreed to become a warden.



The route of The Millennium Way with the 44 walks

The team is comprised of 53 members; chairman (Barry), a walks manager, a photographer, five county wardens, 44 route wardens and a webmaster.

The route for each walk can be accessed on their website (www.millenniumway.org.uk/circular-walks) simply by clicking on one of the points on the map. The length of each walk is listed on the website together with the number of stiles – some walks have no stiles while others resemble the Grand National, Henley-in-Arden for example, has 23 of them. There are also points of interest plus an electronic GPX file of the route to download for use with a navigation app on smartphones to check progress on an OS map while on the walk. The website is updated each week to include any changes that may have occurred.

Barry showed us a range of photographs of the walks, the first was Broughton Hackett, which at three miles is the shortest route. He listed points of interest such as the National Trust property of Packwood House. Across the road from the walk at Henley-in-Arden West, there is a new café called the Henley Kitchen Café which Barry highly recommends and just up the road is the old railway station which has been converted into a quirky, volunteer-run pub. All Saints Church at Middleton Cheney is known for its Pre-Raphaelite ceiling panels painted by William Morris and the stained glass windows by Edward Burne-Jones.

The Millennium Way crosses HS2 in four places and this has caused problems in the past when construction work is in progress, but of late the management have been more forthcoming with details of work likely to be disruptive.

They do get complaints about animals in the fields on the routes, but Barry says he knows of no one being injured by an animal on any of the walks and mainly cows are just curious. They also get complaints about the mud when the weather has been inclement and, although it's beyond their control, they do post warnings on Twitter about mud or other issues that have been reported to them.

At the end of the presentation Barry encouraged us all to get walking after which he answered several questions from the floor and was duly thanked by Chair Ed Wilson (who informed Barry he has walked The Millennium Way himself) and the audience enthusiastically showed their appreciation.



Barry Durman being thanked by Ed Wilson