

Rand'Opale 2010

I always look forward to the annual walks held in the Calais area which are organized by the Association des Randonneurs de la Côte d'Opale with the support of the Fédération Française de Randonnée. This year the walks were held on Sunday 2nd May from Audresselles which is on the coast nearer to Boulogne than Calais. I travelled by train from St Pancras to Dover Priory, meeting up with Justin Lumley at St Pancras as he was catching the same train. We also went together on the same ferry to Calais and both walked to Calais Ville station and a young Englishman came also wanting to go to Paris so I helped him buy his ticket. The Saturday was a holiday so, as is often the case in UK, there were no buses. Justin and I parted here as he had booked too late to find accommodation in Audresselles and was staying near to Calais at Coquelles. I took the train to Wimille-Wimereux as this was the nearest station to Audresselles. I was asked my age and was given a reduction. I was hoping to get a taxi and did eventually come to a large taxi sign in Wimereux where a table was set out and two gentlemen were selling flowers. I asked at the café nearby about taxis and they telephoned for me, a taxi arriving in due course, I believe from Boulogne. I stayed at l' hotel de la Plage (beach hotel) which was noted for its fish restaurant as I believe were, probably, all the restaurants there. The hotel was within sight of the start of the walks, just a short distance up the road.

As previously there was a choice of five walks, 8km, 15km, 25km, 32km and 40km. Justin had suggested that I join him on the 40km walk, a distance I had not attempted before. It cost 2 Euros which included breakfast which was fine as my hotel did not serve breakfast until 8.30am. I set off at 7.30am and when the sun came out, I transferred down to shorts.

All day we enjoyed really lovely rolling countryside. There were six checkpoints and at each one there were free refreshments such as water, squash, pieces of apple, raisins and chocolate etc. I had plenty of opportunity to engage in conversation with other walkers along the route. On arrival at the fifth checkpoint, I had covered just over half the walk (21.8km) and a brasserie was indicated so I stopped there for a sandwich. I had not seen Justin but suddenly noticed him sitting with his friends Charlie and Jackie at the next table. They had not yet had their lunch and I had finished mine so I thought I should be off as I still had a long way to go. I had been speaking French all day as I go to Hitchin for a lesson every Monday so have become reasonably fluent but at the brasserie there were some Dutch people who preferred to speak English.

Unfortunately apart from that brief spell of sunshine, it rained continuously for much of the day but despite this, I really enjoyed the walk. It was very muddy in places and a gentleman kindly helped me down a slippery slope. The walk took us to Escalles and afterwards to Wissant where the walks started from last year. Towards the end of the walk our route took us along the beach and although I noticed some walkers making a wide detour, I pressed on regardless and so arrived with clean boots but very wet feet. During the afternoon it actually stopped raining.

I arrived back at the starting point at 17.25 almost exactly 10 hours since I had started the walk. I felt totally shattered and was wandering about in a daze. In the main reception area there were crowds of walkers eating and drinking. However I eventually found a young lady sitting at a table in an adjoining tent with a pile of diplomas. I showed her my route card and she was very interested in knowing how well I had managed the walk which she knew was very challenging. She gave me a blank diploma to fill in with my name. Previously lists of the walkers who had completed the walks had been put up but this practice appears to have been discontinued. The lull in the rain had now ended and it was windy and raining again so I hurried across the road to my hotel.

Later that evening I set off for a meal as my hotel's restaurant did not open Sunday evenings. I enjoyed another very pleasant evening meal at a restaurant. I took the opportunity to pay my hotel bill that evening as I had intended to have breakfast at a café in the village which served breakfasts from 7.30am. In the morning after breakfast I took the bus into Calais and we passed through several of the villages we had visited on the walk. I arrived home on Monday afternoon, having taken the ferry and train.

I am now looking forward to next year when the walks will be held on Sunday 1st May 2011. No decision has yet been made as to the starting point. Information should be available in due course by going to www.randopale.com

David Allard