

## An obituary for John Cassells (LDWA 1022) 1934-2016

John joined the LDWA in 1976 and, on 10th October, first walked with the local group (formed in January as the Berks, Bucks & Oxon group and officially re-named Thames Valley by the LDWA in March); thereafter he was highly supportive of all its activities for 20 years.

Without being asked, John soon designed a logo which became the badge for over 2 decades, depicting both the original and official names for the group. Upon talk of a mascot, he provided a staff to which he affixed a brass shield he had engraved. John transported this faithfully to and from each group walk. However, it was a joke and utterly unwieldy so that, gradually, nobody else would carry it so it was 'archived'.

Like most (all?) early LDWA members he had other sporting interests: athletics when younger and then Football (Rugby Union). His team captain remembers him as a team player and absolutely reliable, always giving 100% effort. Though still fit and enthusiastic, under 6 foot but 14 stone and then in his 40s, John was finding it increasingly hard to prop the scrum of Henley Rugby Club's 2nd team.

The challenge walks associated with the LDWA offered an attractive alternative outlet. Leading him (and others) on an early Three Forests Way, I missed a turn and, upon realising it, went back in a fury, only John keeping up with the furious pace over the extra miles, despite his build: giving 100% effort. On his first 100, the first Cleveland, he covered the first 5 miles in an hour in scorching hot weather - because others did.

As it happened, the 65 or so miles of the Oxfordshire Way's original route, followed as a Winter group walk, lingered long in the memories of its participants without any affection. Laying down to rest at the dawn of the 2nd day, and falling asleep, John roused us with a yell as he leapt to his feet. A cow had ambled over and licked his face with a tongue like a metal file. Near the end, one half of the group saved a mile or two but, of course, John was in the other half.

Following a compassionate discharge from the REME in the '50s, John had returned to the area around Henley-on-Thames where he had been born, working across Berkshire and Oxfordshire as a skilled toolmaker and machinist with big engineering companies such as Vandervells and later AWRE as well as smaller ones. This enabled him to buy the house in which he lived for the rest of his life. Curiously, though both he and his wife, May, were twins, none of their 4 sons were, although twins re-appeared among the many grandchildren.

Through his father, killed in World War II while John was a child, he had relatives in the North with whom he kept contact. On one visit, he joined a relative on a walk with a local group whose members reminded him constantly how easy the terrain was in the South. This became tedious to John but he took it in good humour. When a choice of paths arose – either around a steep hill or over the top - John opted naturally for the latter and waited with his relative at the far side for the remainder of the group to arrive on the lower path. Following which there was no further talk of soft-Southerners.

Told by Philip Ward, an early member of the LDWA and TV local group and knowledgeable about plants, that a certain large fungus found on a local walk was edible and how to prepare it, John took a couple home. Having blanched them, he sat down to mushrooms on toast. He chewed a preliminary portion: and chewed: and chewed ... and put the plate onto the floor. The dog, which always ate anything donated like that, ambled over, sniffed and walked away. Edible in the sense of not being harmful, yes, edible as something that can be eaten, no.

His patience was tested on a group walk when a farmer, a huge and intimidating man accompanied by a large Alsatian dog, blocked our way accusing us of trespass. He emphasised each word with a switch against John's chest and I saw John, no light-weight, eye him dangerously. I kept us moving and sweet-talked the man until we were off his land (learning later that the farmer appeared before the magistrates for pulling a girl off her horse). John said simply that the farmer might have managed to hit him once but wouldn't have done so twice - and I shudder even now at what might have ensued.

During a special one-off special 100 mile group walk over a weekend, only John aimed at and completed the entire distance, though in a very sore state for the final 10 miles, but still up to a challenge. Seen as a reliable man, John shepherded the back-markers over almost the whole of the 1990 Chiltern Hundred.

John's huge number of acquaintances and contacts served the TV group well through the Oxon Walks of which he was a co-founder and the nominal organiser of the first in 1980. He arranged use of the Rugby Club for several years and produced routes. Checking one beside the Thames in Henley in 1982, John noted many gaps in several small footbridges in the first mile. A man of action rather than of letters, he wheeled a barrow of planks and tools through the town and we repaired them ourselves. At a later chance encounter, and much to John's amusement, the Secretary of the local branch of the RA mentioned having received a mysterious letter from the County Council thanking the RA for the repairs. When the need arose to switch the starting point of the Oxon Walks, John 'had a word' with someone and got the present base at the YMCA in Henley.

John might be most widely remembered for his cheerful greetings, his smiles and a readiness to talk to anyone. Apart from the terribly unhappy period of his divorce, the only occasion I re-call John showing misery was while waiting at a checkpoint on a 100 after retiring unwell. He was essentially an optimist. In a rural analogy, his mother had once told John that he was the one among her children who, on falling into the cesspit, would come out smelling of roses. He lived his life as if that was true.

Eventually John became a postman for which his knowledge of the area, a readiness to speak to people and his reliability made him eminently suitable. The small communities on his route outside the town adopted him as an honorary resident. He still had great energy and loved the exercise; at the end of one cold Autumn, he was ordered to stop wearing shorts.

In the 1990s John turned to running half-marathons while retaining contact with the local LDWA and RA groups. After retirement, his knowledge of the local paths and a desire to preserve them was invaluable. Despite his knees 'going' he determined to keep walking and running.

However, an enemy arose within and prospered – Alzheimers Disease. After 2014 he simply forgot to re-new his membership of the LDWA. He had become so ill that he might arrive somewhere not knowing why he'd gone there; or become stranded, not knowing where he was going to. Eventually he could be lost almost within sight of his home of 60 years. Though he remained physically capable, Alzheimers killed him. Abruptly over 2 days in 2016 he ceased to recognise people or to eat and drink, he shrank visibly, and he died.

In the cycle of life, he saw a grandson become a talented youth player of his other sport, Rugby Football. 2016 also saw the 37th year of the Oxon Walks John had co-founded. Entrants use paths John did to follow his footsteps literally in a living memorial.

(LDWA 766)