



A mile in my shoes

For many of us, a Christmas stroll is a tradition. Clare Balding goes on a unique 'empathy walk' and invites some of her fellow Weekend columnists to reveal their favourite routes

I was walking in Kent a few months ago, exploring the Hoo Peninsula from Gravesend to the Cliffe Pools Nature Reserve, following the Saxon Shore Way. The route took me from the busy town centre into flat, open land with wild ponies, past gravel works and along hedgerows bursting with blackberries. It's where Charles Dickens walked with his father and it was the setting for the opening chapter of *Great Expectations*.

The landscape had a vaguely roguish personality, and I could imagine smugglers arriving in the dead of night with their spoils, or criminals on the run waiting for a boat to pick them up, but even more interesting than these imaginings was the company. I was walking with Clare Patey and Roman Krznaric who are, respectively, the director and founder of the Empathy Museum.

Roman told me about his reasons for establishing a mobile museum that spreads the message of empathy.

'Empathy is a force for social change,' he says. 'It helps us understand people who are different from us. If the 20th century, with all its self-help books and introspection, was the era of "Who am I?", maybe the 21st century will be the era of "Who are you?" I think empathy is about discovering other people and changing ourselves through that process.'

The current Empathy Museum project is a listening experience called *A Mile In My Shoes*. Based on the idea that you should never judge a man until you have walked for a while in his moccasins, they have designed a shipping container to look like a giant shoe box, and it travels the country appearing in town centres and at festivals. The idea is that people will pick a pair of shoes in their size and walk for a mile wearing them while listening to a recording of the person who owned them.

The stories are also available as a podcast, and I've listened to at least

BEST FOOT FORWARD
Clare Balding



OUT OF THE BOX Empathy Museum's latest project is a collection of shoes and audio stories

a dozen of them. Some are tragic, others are heart-warming, all are intriguing because they are an honest reflection of a life experience.

With the Medway Estuary on my left, I walked along wearing a pair of bright pink furry monster slippers while listening to a woman from Newcastle who in her teens had been attacked by a gang on a cold night and had her head battered. She crawled home through the snow and when she was finally taken to hospital she was put into an induced coma. She recovered from her brain injuries and is considered a medical miracle. Her case was used to change the way serious head injuries are treated.

I could hear her voice in my head as I walked in her slippers, feeling the mud ruts and pebbles beneath my feet, and it was an incredibly intense experience. I felt that she was telling me, and only me, about the most important event of her life.

With walking a mile in someone else's shoes in mind, I've asked fellow Weekend columnists to share their favourite walks with us. I'm thinking of it as their Christmas present to us all.



NATURE CALLS Explore the wild, flat lands of the Hoo Peninsula and Medway Estuary, which offer many birdwatching opportunities

Photography: Alamy, Getty Images



JANE GARVEY



'Why don't you go for a walk?' That sentence, usually thundered by a parent sick of my petulant teenage presence curdling the milk at home, used to chill the blood. I mean: a walk. What for?!

Inevitably, though, I was soon out of the house and on the walk. And although I tried, it's quite hard to be completely down-in-the-mouth when the dog (our Border collie, Jenny) was so happy to be dawdling along with me.

It was always exactly the same walk. My lack of imagination is indefensible, especially as I believed in a glittering future for myself as one of the great novelists. All I needed was my genius to be recognised – and to actually write a novel.

My route took me from the respectable sprawl of suburban Great Crosby, a few miles north of Liverpool, across a cricket pitch and on to the still-rural village of (wait for it) Little Crosby. Okay, not exactly the stuff of the great Victorian lady adventurers and I doubt even Michael Palin could turn it into a watchable documentary, but it worked for us. And on the way, we'd go past a place everyone should know about: Sniggery Woods. It sounds unlikely, but I promise it exists. To be entirely accurate, 'Woods' does overegg it slightly – it's more of a thicket. But Sniggery Thicket sounds silly. Unlike Sniggery Woods.

You could usually get a heady whiff of the Mersey, but for reasons I do not know, my sulky hormonal excursions with Jenny never involved the beach. This was before Crosby Beach became a bona fide tourist attraction. It was always moodily impressive, I now realise: huge, ever-changing skies, ships, tugs and views of the Welsh mountains and Blackpool Tower. In my mind, it was then linked with the faint possibility of a Mr Whippy with raspberry sauce from the omnipresent ice-cream van. It takes positive thinking to try to flog ice cream on the Mersey riverbank in December.

The sculptor Antony Gormley's naked iron men have been on the beach since 2007. Its formal title is *Another Place*, although I've never heard anyone use it. The men are barnacled and rusty now, but their eyes are still fixed firmly on the horizon and new possibilities.

I still visit with my parents, and if the wind allows, we'll get out of the car and potter down the coastal path. Jenny is no more, and I never suffer dog-envy more than when I see a tail-wagging collie sniffing the sea air.

IRON MEN Stroll among Antony Gormley's famous figures on Crosby Beach

FI GLOVER



There is a spot at the eastern tip of Victoria Park where, for me, all of London and all of life comes together. Vicky Park – as everyone calls it – is 213 acres of outdoor wonder, landscaped

in parts but just flat and green for most of it, and a proper lung in London's East End. If I stand under one of the plane trees on the outer rim, my eyes will tell me I'm immersed in nature but my ears will pick up the roar of the A12 only a couple of hundred yards away.

If you look above the canopy of trees, you'll see the dynamic buildings of the Olympic Park – the spiralling ArcelorMittal Orbit viewing tower and the white gleam of the stadium. If you turn 90 degrees, your gaze will be caught by Canary Wharf and the skyline of the City.

This is my favourite walk in London and I walk every day now with Nancy, a 'retired' greyhound whom I fell in love with at a rescue kennel. Together, we've trekked Hampstead Heath and squelched through the wetlands of Walthamstow, but I always come back to Vicky Park because its long, flat landscape makes the horizon so beautifully wide. It's rare in London to find that without going up a hill first, and on a practical level it means I can see Nancy when she tears off, as greyhounds do.

A pacy walk around the whole perimeter will take 45 minutes – past the skate park, the fishing lake, the Old English garden, the cricket nets, two cafés, one pagoda and the most extraordinary and now-defunct granite drinking fountain, which was gifted to the park by a philanthropic baroness. As no respecter of either history or class, it is Nancy's favourite 'relief' station.

The park is where we'll be on Boxing Day, convincing ourselves that we are walking off some of the excesses, although, because London is open all hours, I'm rather hoping we'll be able to stop for a cardamom bun at the Pavilion café.

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PARK LIFE London's Victoria Park is a green oasis in the urban East End

WEEKENDING



WINDOW SHOPPING Take a tour of department-store displays for the very essence of a New York Christmas

ALVIN HALL



'These vagabond shoes, are longing to stray/ Right through the very heart of it/New York, New York'. Every Christmas Eve I go for a long, late-evening walk. The purpose? To experience the fun, sparkle, creativity, wit, humour and beauty of what, for me, epitomises the glimmering spirit of an urban Christmas: the Big Apple's department-store windows.

First, Macy's, 34th Street and Broadway. Its windows ooze nostalgia, evoking adjectives like 'darling' and 'heart-warming', beautifully capturing and affirming the traditional family images and fairy tales associated with Christmas.

Next stop, Lord & Taylor at 39th and 5th. There are no window displays this year; the store is closing permanently on the last day of December. Nonetheless, I stroll by, remembering the always-sweet, mechanically animated displays that have delighted generations of children and adults.

I then continue uptown, past the New York Public Library's iconic lion sculptures with deep-green wreaths around their necks, to Saks Fifth Avenue at 49th Street. Its style-themed, fantasy windows are always a surprise, evoking as they do fashion-police comments from the chattering crowds.

Bloomingdale's, at 59th and Lexington, typically has dramatic windows based on a single theme

that can look like Christmas on steroids – more colourful, more active, more everything! Part of the delight is thinking about the fertile minds of people who imagine and create these wonders.

At this point, a reality check is needed, and Barneys, at 61st and Madison, delivers. The store is known for its witty, clever holiday windows riffing on contemporary issues, events and trends, from celebrity to politics. Never uninteresting, sometimes they puzzle me, but often they make me laugh out loud – and, yes, people stare.

I save the best until last: Bergdorf Goodman at 58th and 5th Avenue. Absolutely no one does it better! The windows are mesmerising and glitteringly wondrous in the way fashion is incorporated, in their complexity and richness. Every year they are simply beyond deluxe.

Full of visual and aesthetic satisfaction, I head home down 5th Avenue, enjoying anew the huge glimmering Swarovski crystal snowflake suspended at 57th Street. My final stop? Not a department-store window, but the traditional Rockefeller Center Christmas tree. The emotional impact of this enduring symbol of Christmas in the city never diminishes.

I never take pictures but, stopping to rest and warm up at a nice rooftop bar with a view of the red and green lights atop the Empire State Building, I let each year's stroll settle into my memory in its own way and order my favourite cocktail. Its name captures the spirit of my Christmas walk – Perfect Manhattan.

'Every Christmas Eve I go for a long, late-evening walk to experience the fun, sparkle, creativity, wit, humour and beauty of the Big Apple's department-store windows'

ALVIN HALL



JONATHAN AGNEW



Christmas was effectively cancelled in the Agnew household last year. My wife, Emma, was nearing the end of her long course of chemotherapy, and with a session due on the day after Boxing Day, the two of us hunkered down, largely staying away from friends and family.

This year will be very different. Emma is fully restored and our three spaniels can anticipate a vigorous stretch to walk off the impact of a splendid Christmas lunch. (I have been given special permission to barbecue the turkey this year.)

My favourite walk takes us along part of the Jubilee Way, which stretches from Burrough on the Hill to Melton Mowbray. We catch the last four miles, following the Scafford Brook, which

is particularly popular with the dogs. Not only do they run miles chasing rabbits and hares, which always leave them standing, but they love the clear spring water, no matter how icy cold it is. One year, one of the dogs seemed in difficulty, so I spontaneously – and, as it turned out, entirely unnecessarily – jumped in to pull him out of the freezing water. That particular walk was abandoned prematurely.

The route takes us through lush green fields. Before you know it, you are strolling into the magnificent Melton Country Park. What a gem! The lakes are home to ducks and swans, children play football in the open spaces and walkers exchange pleasantries while their dogs get to know each other, as dogs do.

I can't wait, but if the barbecued turkey is a disaster, I suspect the walk will be conducted in stony silence.



COUNTRY PURSUITS Dogs delight in a long walk to Melton Mowbray

RITULA SHAH



By the time we pull on our shoes to head out for The Walk, the most exciting part of Christmas is over. The obligatory breath of fresh air could be an antidimax. My local park slopes down to an ugly stretch of urban river. But I am in a different place, on a different walk, one that exists vividly in my mind's eye and bears almost no resemblance to the grey open space in front of me.

It's autumn 1987. The weeks are unravelling towards December. Sarah, Stu and I are students in Venice. Each morning, we leave our flat in Castello, pass gossiping elderly ladies in black dresses, who stare disapprovingly, and wave at the couple selling fresh pasta.

Briefly, we walk by the Grand Canal and catch a glimpse of San Giorgio Maggiore in the distance, then a right turn, past the forbidding Arsenale, Venice's abandoned naval yard. We cross a wooden bridge, steal a glance at the marble lion standing guard and walk up a street dotted with bars filled with old men downing espressos and grappa, even though it's not yet nine.



VENETIAN DREAMS Stunning San Giorgio Maggiore from the Grand Canal

It's often cold and wet, so most days we stop and greedily devour a warm pastry oozing with custard before hurrying on our way through the Venetian labyrinth.

We dodge hissing stray cats before turning one more corner and arriving at San Francesco della Vigna. We ignore the grand façade of yet another Renaissance church and walk into the draughty brick building nearby, which hosts our lectures and is where our day really begins.

The December light is fading. I head home, in search of some grappa.