

**B**orn in Aberystwyth and brought up in Meltham, West Yorkshire, on the Pennines, hills were always bound to feature in my life. Everywhere in Meltham there are glimpses of moors; remote places with strange names – West Nab, Deer Hill – often distant in mist, yet sometimes brought so close by startlingly clear Pennine weather they appear like a painted backcloth above the roofs.

I remember my grandad – an ex-miner and working-class gentleman, who loved walking – saying, ‘Look at this, lad, you’ll remember this for the rest of your life.’ And I do. We were standing at ‘wall-corner’ high on Wessenden Road, looking down over Meltham on a cold, clear day. Emley Moor TV mast like a landlocked lighthouse and other distant towers were brought into sharp focus by those strange atmospheric conditions that bring a clarity that is as rare as it is surprising. What was clear from Grandad – as clear as every misshapen gritstone rock across the moor – was that day, this was ours, it belonged to us. I still carry that with me now, wherever I walk.

My passion for hillwalking and my passion for singing and performing were always the two sides of my life and character, the one almost the antidote to the other. Being the lead singer of Oysterband for over 40 years means that I travel long distances in a tour bus, staring out of the window at hills and mountains, wondering what it would be like to be there.

This awakened in me the idea of walking 15-20 miles, finding a venue, anywhere – pub, church, village hall, open space – setting up and playing there. In 2009, my agent said ‘Go for it,’ then three Oysterband musicians finally said: ‘Okay, we’ll join you.’ This



## MY WALK OF LIFE

# John Jones

The folk-rock singer and Powys Ramblers president started walking between gigs, inspiring a community of music fans to join him

INTERVIEW TOM POVEY



📍 Above left: John on a walk in the Lake District – Blencathra is in the background. Above right: performing at Shrewsbury Folk Festival

band of walking musicians became John Jones and the Reluctant Ramblers (jj-rr.org).

It was an idea that caught people’s imagination and it just grew. We walked across England from the Welsh border to Leicester for Oysterband’s Big Session Festival. We walked the Pennines from the Staffordshire Moorlands to Yorkshire, and back through the Derbyshire Dales, and crossed Devon over

Exmoor and Dartmoor. Each time, we met local people, pursued hidden paths and I wrote songs that reflected the area and landscape to perform each evening. Rambling, music, local stories, food and beer became part of the same story, giving our journey an identity and awareness of community.

So many people have shared this experience – taking up walking and feeling a shared

sociability through the regular rhythm of footfall and gentle conversation. Sometimes they have challenged themselves and hopefully always found friends and humour. The walks have attracted people from Denmark, Germany and even Western Canada. One lady who had lost her husband to a rare form of cancer the previous year, described how joining her first walk in 2013 was a great source of support that ‘affirmed her belief in the restorative power of walking, music and good company’. She has returned to almost every walk since.

After a thousand miles, it has grown way beyond what I imagined. In a sense it has been the victim of its own success, with about 60-70 walkers bringing the added pressure of duty of care, finding pubs for lunchtime that will take us all and a willing support team. I am also conscious of the intrusion of such a large group into quiet and sensitive areas.

I am lucky to live on the Welsh border, where I moved more than 25 years ago. Life here is the very definition of social distancing, but I am missing people and an audience to sing to. Kitchen concerts and conversation are okay up to a point, but you realise how much music needs people, a shared feeling and a shared pint, to give it real meaning. Keeping safe is important, but so is keeping sane. It is almost as if we are in slow motion and imagination is fighting to stay alive.

I am sure the journey isn’t over, but for now my own walking in Mid Wales, and occasional special events like the Big Welsh Walk are enough [2020’s event was initially postponed but has now been cancelled]. I am proud to be president of Powys Ramblers, a connection itself that came through music and rambling. For me, the two are inseparable.