

London Bridges Trek on behalf of the National Literacy Trust

12th September 2015

I wanted a challenge. Something to challenge me both mentally and physically whilst raising money for a charity of my choice. What prompted this madness is a good question to ask and one I asked myself on numerous occasions, but as usual there was more than one reason. Since breaking my hip in a freak accident in January 2013 I had begun to believe that physical exercise was no longer an option as it would aggravate the injury and cause even more pain. It was a wake-up call that I was not as young as I once was and maybe had to start conducting my life differently to accommodate this physical setback. I was in a classic state of feeling sorry for myself and that I did not have the same control over my own destiny as I once did. My second reason was that being on the cusp of beginning my final year of my degree course I knew I had to start with a positive frame of mind and that is where the idea of the challenge came along. I wanted to do something that incorporated all of my passions and so the London Bridges Trek was the obvious choice – it would be enough of a challenge at 20km, it involved being in London and I could choose who to raise money for. I decided on The National Literacy Trust as my charity as I have had a lifelong passion for books and reading, part of my reason for wanting to study at degree level.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have such a positive relationship with books and literacy, which has been there as long as I can remember. Throughout my life books have provided a safe haven and answers to many of life's questions. My ability to get lost in a book is legendary and I have so many at home I have lost count. Books for me represent relaxation, escape, solace, wonder, excitement, sadness, help and discovery. They allow me to travel to places I could never afford to visit, meet people I would otherwise have not known and have helped me to work through some of my most difficult years growing up. Some of my favourite books as a child were 'The Bookshop on the Quay', 'Alice in Wonderland', 'The Secret Garden', any 'Famous Five' books, a compendium of Disney stories, 'Little House on the Prairie', 'The Railway Children' and many more besides. As an adult I enjoy historical novels about life in the Great War or World War II, stories about families set in Birmingham and London, teen fiction such as 'The Hunger Games' and 'Twilight' series of books – but I will read anything which I feel has been well written and researched.

I have worked with children and young people who have a non-existent relationship with books and reading and introduced reading and stories into their lives. Often this has been done to help them resolve emotional issues in their lives which had begun to overwhelm them. The National Literacy Trust promotes the use of books and literacy to people throughout the UK and do some amazing work with all ages which

is why I chose them in particular. So, the London Bridges Trek challenge was born and I knew that I had many good reasons to complete it – I knew that if I was successful then I would be able to face up to any challenges that my final year at Newman University presented me with and start the year in a positive frame of mind. Bring on the challenge!

The day of the challenge arrived and I had not achieved as much preparation as I had planned for but the determination to do it was there anyway – despite a 6.00am start on a Saturday morning to travel down to London. Queuing up on arrival to register I could hear the ‘professional’ trekkers talking about having the latest clothing and equipment and also the fact that 50km was considered a Sunday stroll. At this point I plugged my I-pod in and drowned them out before I became anymore unnerved at their wealth of experience. I noticed that I was probably the only lone walker as everyone else was in pairs or groups – I was also probably the only one raising money for a more non-traditional charity. After registration came the ‘Zumba’ warm-up which was an unexpected challenge but I resigned myself to the necessity of warming-up so dragged myself through it. At 11.15am our group was sent off in a cacophony of cheering and loud hooters – I was on my way.

I set my own pace and ignored the ‘racers’ in the group as I wanted to complete this challenge and not die half way round. The sun had made an appearance along with beautiful blue skies and none of the predicted rain (at this point regretting bringing extra layers for all weather eventualities as my bag was heavy enough with drinks and snacks). Walking along the Thames there was a cooling breeze which helped counteract some of the sun’s heat and I was pleasantly surprised at the peace and quiet at the Putney end of the trek. The trek involved following fluorescent pink arrows and crossing each and every bridge between Putney Bridge and Tower Bridge – how hard can it be? During the first few kilometres I was worrying about maybe getting cramp or blisters but soon settled into a rhythm and started to enjoy the stunning views along the river. Reaching the 5km mark was a sign that I was a quarter of the way and thankfully still fully functioning so this was a positive indication.

I wanted to record the trek photographically and used my trusty phone to take many photographs along the way of views or buildings that caught my eye. However, not wanting to keep stopping to take pictures I decided to ‘snap’ on the move and hope for the best. About 8km in I was asked by a member of the public what I was up to and where we were all headed which gave me an opportunity to explain the event and my reasons for doing it, prompting me to reflect upon my love of books. Growing up on the outskirts of London I have vivid memories of hearing the aeroplanes soaring overhead on their way out of Gatwick or Heathrow while reading in the back garden and this led to one of my first photographs of an aeroplane against a deep blue sky. I started thinking about my childhood books and how some

of them have been lost to me over the years due to multiple house moves and how their loss is one of my greatest regrets. I am unashamedly sentimental when it comes to books and I grieve the loss of any that have gone 'missing' – however, I also remembered how I still have my Disney compendium of stories from when I was 6 years old which is slowly falling apart from over-use as a child. I thought about my life journey and how books have been a constant companion throughout – they often took the place of family and friends as they represented far more loyalty than a human could ever provide. Books have served me well throughout my education and formed some of my early favourites, such as 'Macbeth', 'Jane Eyre' and 'Frankenstein' and then I had the pleasure of using children's picture books in emotional literacy sessions with children who were experiencing various issues, such as bullying, neglect, low self-esteem and anger.

Near the 10km mark I spotted a series of buildings which appeared to have 'open books' on their roofs and I made sure I took a picture of those due to the wonderful irony. Beyond the half way point I encountered a far more busy London and a sense of different events happening as I walked. The hovering helicopters against a backdrop of the Houses of Parliament and a ridge of black ominous cloud added to the drama, which I later discovered to be the breaking news of Jeremy Corbyn's election as Leader of the Labour Party alongside a huge demonstration in Parliament Square about the Syrian Refugee Crisis. This was on one side of the river whilst the other side was concerned with jostling crowds of tourists being entertained by various street performers and an extraordinarily large sandpit full of children on the South Bank. London is full of fantastic contradictions.

Having to by-pass a large book fair on the South Bank was probably the most challenging part of my trek but I had to keep going for fear of stopping and sitting down. Then just as I thought I had seen it all, I was confronted by several groups of 'Morris Men' (some ladies – Morris People?) travelling across the Millennium Bridge in continuing waves. A truly startling and perplexing sight in the middle of London on a Saturday afternoon, cutting through the sounds of London with hundreds of jingling bells attached to various parts of their anatomy. No idea where they came from or where they were going to, but was fascinating all the same. On the other side of the bridge were tourists asking for selfies with the Motorbike Police (near the demonstration) which they happily obliged. I was in the heart of a truly cosmopolitan London Town and slowly weaved my way through large crowds, who were either on a mission to their next tourist attraction or happily milling around in a distracted fashion. Big Ben towered above the crowds and merrily chimed away, cutting through the noise on the streets.

At this stage of the trek I was becoming aware of painful niggles in my feet and legs and regretting carrying so much in my rucksack. Having to slow the pace seemed to highlight these distractions which up until that point I had managed to ignore. I was

soon distracted by the sight of other 'trekkers' who were clearly of the competitive variety as they were pushing and shoving through the strolling Londoners in order not to lose any time. I am of the 'live and let live' ilk and would never dream of being so arrogant, especially with a bib stating which charitable cause you were humbly doing the trek for. I excused myself through queues outside various attractions, full of eager families ready to part with an unseemly amount of hard earned cash in order to entertain their charges. At this point I also began to lose sight of the fluorescent pink route arrows and the 'km' indicators showing how much further was left! The old adage 'Keep Calm and Carry On' sprang to mind so I surged forward hoping and praying I was on the right route, having lost sight of fellow walkers in the crowds.

My intuition paid off when I finally came across my next pink arrow indicating I was going in the right direction after all and I continued listening to Adele singing 'Chasing Pavements' as I marched forward towards the finish. Approaching the 20km milestone I had a feeling of euphoria at having managed to walk the route without any major injury or mishap and knew that a cup of tea was also in reach. However, to my horror I passed by the large fluorescent pink 20km to find that the finish line was not as near as I had imagined – I still had to keep going even further! I felt slightly conned at this point and let out some inward groans as I continued following the now annoying pink arrows. The next distraction came soon after this as I entered a narrow cobbled street approaching Tower Bridge – why were there crowds of people gathering to take photographs of a coffee shop? It just happened to be the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team having a mini tour of London which would have been more interesting if I was a rugby fan, but alas not. I passed them by and left the die-hard rugby fans to their worshipping. Surely the end is in sight now?

A little further down there was a final pink arrow directing me through a gap in the buildings towards the Dixie Queen boat, moored on the Thames. The relief at crossing the finish line and stepping onto the gang plank to enter the boat was immense, followed by thoughts of how dreadful I must now look after all my effort. I was greeted by the compere for the event who was busy dog-sitting the canine participants (who were proudly wearing their medals) and went aboard to receive my own. Elation, exhaustion and incredulity at the efforts of the previous four hours flooded over me and I gracefully collapsed in a heap on the deck. I had made it.

Most importantly, I have raised £200 for the National Literacy Trust which I shall be very pleased to pass on to them in the coming weeks. I had proved to myself that I was capable of anything and it felt great – bring on my final year at Newman University as I am now ready.











