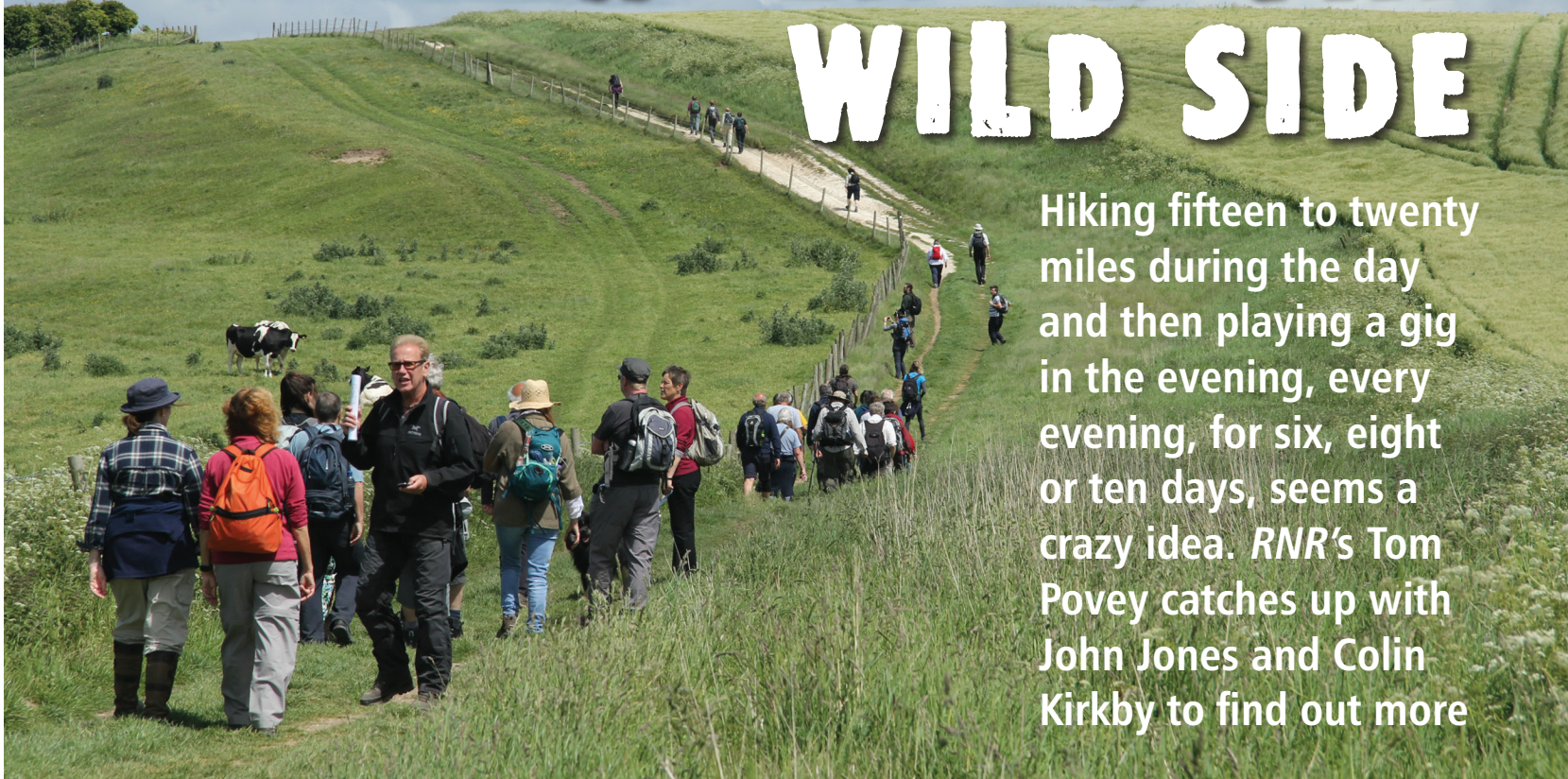


# WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Hiking fifteen to twenty miles during the day and then playing a gig in the evening, every evening, for six, eight or ten days, seems a crazy idea. *RNR's* Tom Povey catches up with John Jones and Colin Kirkby to find out more



On 25 May 2009, John Jones And The Reluctant Ramblers played their first big gig at the Barrels pub in Hereford as part of the bank holiday Monday beer festival. John, lead singer of Oysterband and a keen walker, had persuaded fellow musicians, local walkers and a few fans to join him three days earlier to walk from Hay-on-Wye to Hereford with three smaller gigs along the way. The group continued on to the Malvern Hills, Worcester and then on to Cheltenham Racecourse to play at the Wychwood Festival. The idea of a walking tour was born.

The band back then was J.J. with three friends from Oysterband: Chopper (Ray Cooper), Al Scott and Dil Davies. They played John's songs – his first solo album *Rising Road* was released in 2009; they played covers, and then there was "Chelvis" – Chopper doing Elvis songs on his cello.

A favourite gig that both John and Dil remember fondly came later on during the third stage of that Feet Don't Fail Me Now tour. The gig was by the canal side at Braunston. Brad arrived with a PA and they set up in the car park. People got off their boats to come to watch and listen. It was impromptu yet professional. After the gig, Dil realised that there were no arrangements to take his drum kit on to the next venue. He was walking. Two members of the audience offered to take the kit home with them and bring it to the next show. Dil remembers saying "thank you very much" and watching the rear lights of the car disappear, wondering whether he would ever see his

rather expensive drum kit again. He did, of course, and the couple became firm friends who joined in subsequent walks.

The walkers on that first tour varied from around a dozen to just three at different times. Numbers grew steadily over the next three years with walks in the Peak District (Spine Of England), from Lyme Regis to Larmer Tree, and the White Horses Walk in 2012 from Nettlebed along the Ridgeway and down to the Village Pump Festival in Westbury. By 2012, the walking tours had a support infrastructure to them, booking places to stay and venues to play, finding lunch stops, providing transport and a web site – [www.jj-rr.org](http://www.jj-rr.org). Tim Porter drove the van, brought the PA, engineered the sound and, just the once, cooked a lovely barbecue lunch.

So, on 27 May 2013, four years later and another bank holiday Monday, over fifty walkers and musicians set off from Eastbourne to walk the South Downs Way to Winchester, with thirty walking over 100 miles all the way, and the musicians playing six gigs in pubs and venues.



From left: John Jones and Colin Kirkby

Prior to that first walk, John and Colin Kirkby had spent ten years going on walks both together and with a few friends. Neither quite knew what to expect as the walking tour idea took hold. Colin remembers John's initial anxiety at how to handle exposing the public to the private side of him that was walking. How would he cope? As John says: "It was different from touring with Oysterband. There you arrive at the venue, disappear into a dressing room, emerge onto the stage and perform. Here, there usually was no dressing room. There was no place to hide. At times while walking I need to take myself away to give myself some time. The other walkers learned to respect this."

Boff Whalley, who had been on the first two days of the very first walk, joined the band in 2013 for the Song Of The Downs tour. Boff, once of Chumbawamba and now *RNR* contributor and an acclaimed playwright, is a keen fell runner and so walking fifteen or twenty miles was no problem. Boff brought a more outspoken Yorkshire irreverence to the sets. His banter with John provided many a highlight in the succeeding shows.

Chopper and Dil had left and three other musicians had now joined the regular band: Tim Cotterell (fiddle and mandolin), Lindsey Oliver (double bass) and Rowan Godel (vocals). Boff played when his other commitments allowed him the time. Benji Kirkpatrick also made occasional guest appearances.

Tim remembers, "The healing power of performing is really interesting. There was

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one time when I could barely walk at the end of the day and it was a way between the hotel and the venue and I hobbled there to change and back to the venue. I was playing barefoot and about two songs in, I found I could suddenly dance and stamp my feet on stage.”

On the 2013 walk, one of the gigs was at the King’s Head in Wickham where Peter Chegwyn, the organiser of the Wickham Festival, was so impressed by the music that he offered the band a set at the next year’s festival on the spot. Two days of walking were organised prior to the band opening the festival on the main stage in 2014.

As the numbers of walkers grew, this brought benefits and challenges. Leading a very large group along a walking trail proved the main challenge. The benefit for a small venue is that the band brought a good portion of the audience with them. Those who had not walked came and enjoyed the music, often finding it hard to believe that the musicians had walked fifteen or twenty miles that day. For the walkers, the relationship became more intense, between being a member of the audience in the evening, seeing performers up on the stage under the lights, and walking with them as ‘normal human beings’ during the day.

There was always banter between songs with events of that day being recalled. Colin remembers being singled out by Boff during the gig at the Three Tuns in Bishops Castle (on the Patron’s Walk when John walked to the Shrewsbury Folk Festival of which he is a patron). Colin was not used to being in the spotlight. No one was safe with Boff around. The gig was sold out in advance

and the ticket desk was loath to let extra people in even though there was space in the room. Robert Plant happened to be there with his family to celebrate his birthday and wanted to see the show. He did get in and by all accounts enjoyed the music.

On Saturday 31 May 2014, over seventy walkers and friends gathered at the Swan Inn in Noss Mayo to listen to John Jones And The Reluctant Ramblers play outside as the sun went down over the estuary. This was the end of a walk that covered 117 miles and seven, mostly sold-out, gigs from north to south Devon including quite a challenging crossing of Dartmoor.

The Two Moors, Two Seas tour in 2014 was an exceptional tour. More walks and more gigs followed in subsequent years but nothing to quite match the scale and co-operation of those eight days. John had his commitment to Oysterband and the support group all had full-time jobs.

John released his second solo album, *Never Stop Moving*, in 2015. In 2016, both Colin and John wanted to walk for charities – Colin for his local St. Michael’s Hospice and John for the Macmillan Cancer Trust. Two walking tours were organised, one in the May bank holiday week and the second in the September. The latter was titled The Homecoming Tour and included both a return gig at the Barrels in Hereford, where they had played in 2009, and a return to Presteigne after completing over 1000 miles of walking and playing over fifty gigs in seven years.

Many friendships were created over the course of these walking tours with some groups of walkers organising their own walks without the music. People have come from

Denmark, Germany, the U.S.A. and Canada to join the walking and enjoy the music. Many newcomers have commented on the inclusive nature of the core walkers. Everyone is welcome even though this has caused some challenges when leading a large (sixty-plus) group of walkers along a trail. Some days have had to be long. Often, half-day walks have been identified for people to either join or stop off. People who join the walks recognise that they are responsible for themselves. They can enjoy walking with others and/or just enjoy the music and friendships in the evening.

Looking back at the very first walk, Ray Cooper sums it up thus: “Having spent many years on the road I got well used to sitting around all day waiting for the show to start in the evening. Sitting in the hotel lobby, sitting in the tour bus, sitting in the dressing room. John’s walking tour was the complete opposite; the day is spent walking and what was interesting was that, once we got used to it, walking all day was no more tiring than sitting around all day. It was a revelation, and I remember coming home at the end of it rejuvenated and feeling like I had been on holiday. Unforgettable.”

And Boff, writing in his reflections on the Spine of England II tour of 2018, says: ‘There it was, in a snapshot, what the whole ‘idea’ is about – the exhaustion of a day’s walk, ramblers and band and J.J. gathering and chatting through the ups and downs of the route, readying for a concert and revelling in the repeated rhythm of the walks and gigs.’

Walking and music continue in 2019 with a weekend back at Thelkeld in the Lake District. See [www.jj-rr.org](http://www.jj-rr.org) for details. ❖

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**Walking all day was no more tiring than sitting around all day**  
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John and The Reluctant Ramblers, Hailsham Pavilion, 2013. From left: Boff Whalley, Rowan Godel, Al Scott, John, (Dil Davies, hidden), Tim Cotterell, Benji Kirkpatrick