

PEOPLE & PLACES

GRIFF RHYS JONES MR & MRS JONES



The road less taken is less taken for a reason

You may recall a poem by Robert Frost. Everybody does. It is about "taking the road less travelled". He takes it, of course. And is just a bit smugly self-satisfied, too, if you ask me. But frankly you want to be a bit

circumspect about this sort of poetic nonsense in a real wood, in real life.

Earlier this month, with Mrs Jones and some other "no-we-are-not-really-old" folk, I set out from Montgomery in Wales after a big breakfast – but before the injunction for us all to stay at home – to keep an appointment with Offa's Dyke.

By the end of the first four miles of our hike, we'd exhausted speculation on Offa, that eighth-century Donald Trump. We decided that he had indeed built his wall to keep out the Welsh (as archaeologists now insist he didn't). We'd exhausted the "How the hell did they do this with nothing more than a stick and slavery" cogitation – and by the time we had climbed to the Beacon Ring fort, we'd exhausted ourselves as well.

Even the most manically chattering of the chattering classes (me) fell

silent as the gently swelling hill east of Welshpool kept on swelling.

Novice walkers are familiar with the phenomenon. You slog on, crest a hill and (would you believe it!) confront another. "Oh no, there's more! Ha ha."

This was the first thing I had been able to utter for 20 minutes. It wasn't a mountain, it wasn't even much of a hill – but that had been a big breakfast. And in all it was six miles of relentless trudge on a freezing March day.

That other poet, Wordsworth, was wrong about the season. "It is the first mild day of March", he begins one ode. "The black bird sings from the tall larch..." And then the insufferable Romantic prig tempts his companion outside to revel in the early spring. But let me tell you, William, March in north-east Wales isn't spring. It's the fag end of winter. And what of "April is the cruellest

month"? (TS Eliot). Really, Thomas? March is the most psychopathic month, if you ask me. I will never forget that caravan holiday in Maylandsea 30 years ago. This Welsh experience was coming close.

The new lurgy was spreading through London, but how quickly had we forgotten that other plague – floods. In the fields below Montgomery, the inundation was still sitting there. "Are you wearing wellingtons?" asked a man in a frogman's suit, squelching towards us. He meant that the Offa's Dyke Path was an utter mire. You don't know what "a mire" is? We do. An utter one.

Every narrow passage, every gap through a thorny hedge, every slippery path alongside the gurgling brook was churned into a bottomless swamp by feckless sheep. Each stile required calculation worthy of the Royal Engineers. "Put a foot there, use the log in the middle, then jump across the boggy bit and hold on to the gate... oh. Never mind."

So, now cold, wet, tired, panting from an uphill struggle and wary of yet more slop, we stood looking at a fork in the way. "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood", as Frost's poem puts it. We determined to follow the road less taken, a grassy track that headed in the right direction for a mile, then petered out. Nothing. No



An uphill struggle: Offa's Dyke

'Are you wearing wellingtons?' asked a man in a frogman's suit, squelching towards us.

path. We were facing a thicket of young pines – and we barged in. It was like pushing through a beard of garden-centre Christmas trees. Robert Frost didn't mention this.

I half expected the branches to turn into fur coats. Would we walk out of a wardrobe into a Forties bedroom? We didn't. We got scratched, whipped by twigs and hopelessly lost. Forget the road less taken. We had to fight our way back to the road *more* taken. After a few hours of jarring, juddering progress straight downhill, the pub we were seeking turned out to be shut. Not because of the plague. It was just too early in the season. Because it is cold in March.

Sitting on a bench in the car park, we wondered if the citizens of Oswestry had already shut up shop. Might they be waiting, ready to burn visitors from London?

That evening, we did the right thing. We decided the coronavirus made it politic to return home and get back to our own houses, as all travellers should. Our decision had nothing to do with the mud, rain, cold, scratches and aching hip joints. Or not much, anyway.

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'It was just me and the penguins'

Writer **Nell Stevens** tried extreme isolation during a solitary spell in the Falklands, she tells **Laura Holt**

When Nell Stevens was offered a three-month fellowship from Boston University to go away somewhere and pen her first book in 2013, she chose the loneliest spot she could think of – a place free of distractions and diversions but, pertinently in these Covid-19 times, big on isolation: the Falklands archipelago.

Beyond the 50th parallel, 300 miles from the already remote Patagonian coast, patrolled by sheep farmers and ringed by shipwrecks, these islands have names that spell out the story: Carcass, Barren, Broken. Not content with their sense of foreboding, Stevens instead chose Bleaker: 1.6 miles across at its widest point and 12 miles long. "Other graduate students on my creative writing course chose Paris or Cuba," she remembers. "But I was anxious to go somewhere I wouldn't be distracted. I was daydreaming of wide open space and ocean."

On Bleaker, she got plenty of that. The fellowship took place in the northern hemisphere summer – bleak (or bleaker?) midwinter in the Falklands, with caracaras circling in leaden skies and seals shielding themselves against the seasonal slap of sleet and snow.

"Because it was the off-season, there was a lot of time alone. It was just me and the penguins. The two owners of the island were at their house in Stanley, the capital, and the island's farm manager arrived only at the end of my stay," she says.

Stevens is talking to me from her home in north London, where she is sitting out the current coronavirus crisis, more prepared than most for a period of social distancing.

In the Falklands she lived in a *Shining*-esque house with 12 bedrooms, normally for four groups passing through on cruise ships. "I slept in one bedroom and lived in this tiny corner of the house, called the sun room – which, ironically, never saw the sun. From there I scuttled back and forth to the kitchen to microwave my soup."

The dark was oppressive, the wind howled, the island seemed morose. There was no phone signal, limited internet access and only the radio for company.

So, how did Stevens get through that winter? Having meticulously planned the food rations she could bring across on the little red plane that brought her there, she found she had woefully underestimated what she would need, so treats were thin



YOU'LL NEVER WADDLE ALONE Nell Stevens, below left; her new best friends on Bleaker Island, main; the house where she lived, below



'The place was exactly as I expected, but I turned out to be different. You end up going a bit mad'

on the ground. For her, ritual became a rite of passage.

"Every day, I'd eat one single Ferrero Rocher chocolate, which I'd bought because it was the lightest thing I could find: basically air, with chocolate wrapped around it," she recalls. "I used to treasure that moment every day. Seeking out small luxuries – however tiny, however silly – and allowing them to be important, was vital."

And how did the book progress? "I had grand plans for immense productivity during the period I was there, which I thought would come good if I stuck to my plans in a regimented way – get up, do exercise, write 2,500 words a day, no matter what," she explains. "But that didn't amount to quality control. You also need energy, an idea and resolve, which I was lacking."

As time passed, it dawned on Stevens that she had written a howler – and not in a good way: a comic yarn about a guy going to the Falklands in search of his long-lost family and getting into scrapes, many of which were her own. "Demanding too much productivity

can be damaging," she acknowledges now – and there are parallels with the Covid-19 situation. "The idea that we should be using our time productively while stuck in our houses ignores the idea that our energy is being sapped worrying about what is happening."

Like many under lockdown now, she made time each day for a walk across the island to eyeball the colony of gentoo penguins. "One time I was really scared," admits Stevens. "I genuinely got lost, and thought I might not find my way home."

In the biting cold, snow, wind and rain, she kept trying to use the landmarks at sea to navigate and yet still kept getting lost. Catching a whiff of the penguins' less-than-favourable guano smell, she eventually managed to steer her way back home, tired, hungry and still very much alone.

"Most people don't want to die cold and alone on an empty island – but you definitely don't want to die cold and alone just five minutes from your house," she points out.

Of course, there is an inherent difference between selective isolation and the current enforced measures regarding the coronavirus. "It was an experiment on my part, which I knew would end when I'd get on a plane," says Stevens. "Isolation that has an end point is quite unlike the current situation. Being isolated in your own company is also very different from isolation with your family – an intense test of bonds with the people with whom you are in lockdown."

Nonetheless, there is much to learn from Stevens's experience – namely, how not to write a novel. "I'd assumed that, by putting myself into the isolated state of a hermit, I would become some sort of spiritual, intellectual powerhouse," she says. "That was absolutely not what happened!"

Self-flagellation aside, in the end the project wasn't a total flop. Snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, Stevens returned home and, realising her mistake, wrote another novel – a better one, about her own experience in the Falklands. Published in 2017, she called it *Bleaker House: Chasing My Novel to the End of the World*.

"I think I've learnt to be a lot kinder



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