

Mike's message

Mountains!

We've recently been away on holiday. This year we journeyed up to Scotland, specifically the Isle of Arran which is situated in the Firth of Clyde. It isn't far from Glasgow as the crow flies, but it could be a different world altogether. Arran's an island that is a microcosm of Scotland itself.

The southern part is lowland whereas the northern half is rugged mountain terrain. It is there, rising high above the seafront cottage we were staying in, that the island's highest peak is located - Goat Fell.

Goat Fell rises 874 metres (2866 feet) above sea level and at 7.30 one morning, together with youngest daughter Anastasia, I set out to climb it. It wasn't the best of conditions. It was raining and a bit windy but we accomplished the climb without too much difficulty and, from the summit, the view was

Well, to be honest there wasn't a view. We were in cloud and we couldn't see a thing. There's a cairn though, with a map on it showing us where everything would be seen if it was clear (see photo above). We sought what shelter there was in the rocks at the summit and ate some of the food we'd taken along. Then we made our way back down, arriving back at the cottage in the early afternoon. It had been a tiring walk but very rewarding. It's been a long time since I last climbed a mountain and I was reminded that, although it's tiring, it is in its own way refreshing. As you climb it's as if you're leaving behind the distractions and busyness of daily life. At the summit, even in wind and rain, there's a sort of peace and quietness. It reminded me of Elijah who, on a mountain, encountered God in "a sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19.12).

It reminded me that mountains are mentioned many times in the Bible. A quick search online lists 368 references. Among these are occasions when people climb mountains for a specific purpose. In Jesus' case he often "climbed a mountain to pray" (eg Mark 6.46, Luke 6.12 and 9.28). He appreciated the opportunity to leave behind the distractions and busyness of daily life to seek that peace and quietness too. Mountains are often depicted as places where God is encountered. As well as a troubled Elijah finding God in "a sound of sheer silence", we find Moses receiving the Law (Exodus 20), the disciples see the glory of God in Jesus' appearance (Mark 9.2) and later saying farewell and witnessing his departure (Matthew 28.16-20).

Not everyone has the opportunity to climb a mountain, but maybe all of us should find some way to escape the distractions and busyness of daily life to seek peace and quietness. Where can you escape to and find the "sound of sheer silence" in which to encounter God anew.



Mike's message

Saltires, Sprockets and Sponsorship

“Why don't you do a sponsored bike ride for St Andrew's?”, said Susan.

Well it seemed a good idea, I enjoy getting out on the bike and try and do a couple of rides, each of around 25 - 30 miles, every week. The problem was how to give it a theme and make it a bit of a challenge?

I decided to visit every church dedicated to St Andrew's that I could find in the four Black Country boroughs. A search of a Methodist and Church of England websites revealed that there were seven, including our own, and another one - St Andrew's, Kings Hill, Darlaston - that has now closed. Although a “dot-to-dot” “as the crow flies” exercise showed the route as 31 miles I guessed, correctly as it turned out, it'd be around 40 miles to actually get round.

I set out at 8.30 a.m. on Monday 22nd September from our own St Andrew's ▲ and travelled the route on the map above in an anticlockwise direction. That took me to; Kings Hill, Birchills (Walsall), Whitmore Reans (Wolverhampton), Sedgley, The Straights (near Sedgley), Netherton and finally Wollescote. Some of the speed and distance stats are shown above. There were of course plenty of Saltires (the flag of St Andrew) on display on the church noticeboards. It's a Saltire month with the Scottish referendum.



Date:	Mon 22 Sep
Start:	8.30am
Distance:	41.6 miles
Moving Time:	3 hrs 32 mins
Av. Speed:	11.8 mph
Max Speed:	26.2 mph
Climbing:	2441 feet
Churches:	8

Things slowed down once I entered Dudley! It wasn't tiredness, rather two other factors. Born in Walsall, having worked in Wolverhampton for many years and now here in Sandwell for over ten - I know those areas well. Dudley isn't as familiar so there were frequent stops to inspect the OS Map. (I had a Garmin cycle computer and an iPhone on me but still love a map!). The other factor was the terrain (below). That first big lump at about 18 miles is Sedgley. After that the route was, to say



the least, undulating. That where the gear sprockets come in to get up and over. At least the climbs were rewarded by plenty of glorious descents to enjoy.

Saltires and sprockets. Oh, and by the way, Sponsorship is still welcome too.

Mike

22nd September 2014

Mike's message

1914 - 2014

We approach this year's season of Remembrance with more than the normal poignancy. This year we have been observing the Centenary of the outbreak of "The Great War", the conflict that would later be called the First World War.

There have been many events to commemorate the Centenary, and many more to come during the next four years. There will, for example, be events to commemorate the four individuals from Sandwell that received the Victoria Cross during the conflict. The citation on that medal is simply "For Valour" but they were only the most prominent of many acts of bravery and courage in the appalling slaughter of that conflict. Let's not forget that courage and sacrifice was present on both "sides" of the conflict. Indeed many in our community had ancestors on "the other side". A time for poignant remembrance indeed.



My Grandfather, Private Harry Claridge who served in the Tank Corps towards the end of WW1 and in the ARP during WW2.



One of 888,246 ceramic poppies being placed at the Tower of London.

There have been things going on nationally too. One of the most striking is the art work that has been in the process of construction in the moat of the Tower of London. The artist Paul Cummins has made and placed 888,246 ceramic poppies in the moat that encircles the Tower of London. Each poppy represents one of the British casualties in WW1. Don't forget that doesn't even include casualties of the British Empire forces and other Allied Powers, such as Italy and France, let alone those of the Central Powers of the German Empire. Those ceramic poppies are now on sale (£25 each plus p&p) with the proceeds to six service charities. Details are at www.poppies.hrc.org.uk

It's easy to forget, as we concentrate on the members of the armed forces that have paid the ultimate sacrifice in wars past and present, that many others have paid and continue to pay, that cost too. Recently we've been shocked by the death of Alan Hemming, murdered by a group that have perverted the image, and misrepresented the message, of the noble religion of Islam. Alan Hemming was captured by his murderers while undertaking his fourth mercy mission to Syria, a mission that was motivated by his love and compassion for all people affected by the current, appalling conflict in that region. Rightly and movingly his sacrifice has been acknowledged by people of many faiths and none. "There was more about the true values of Islam in Alan Hemming than there are in all the members of IS put together" a Manchester Imam tellingly remarked.

Remembrance Sunday is a remembrance of lives lost and of other lives destroyed by injuries, recollections and bereavement. But as well as remembering the past let us pledge ourselves to working for a just peace and compassion for all people, especially those affected by wars.

Mike's message

What's your opinion about it? The Sainsbury's Christmas advert I mean. Have you seen it?

It's based on the true events of 100 years ago, when the hostilities of the early months of the 'Great War' ceased for what has become known as 'The Christmas Truce'.

Documentary evidence is clear that at Christmas, at some points along the front, hostilities ceased, and soldiers from both sides advanced over 'No Man's Land' to greet each other, share photos of family and exchange simple gifts such as chocolate bars. Sainsbury's have produced a bar similar to those sold in 1914 and profits are going to the Royal British Legion.

Despite this worthy cause, a quick look at social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) shows that opinion is very mixed about the advert. Some see it as an intrusion into a sensitive point in history but most of the objections concern the details of the advert, or rather what's lacking.

There's no doubt the cinematography is as stunning as Hollywood's finest productions. There's High Definition, great acting and worthy dialogue. Some of the events of the time are represented, as recalled in many letters home from troops on both sides. The singing, by both British and German lines, of the German Christmas carol 'Silent Night' starts things off and the famous events of the impromptu football games in 'No Man's Land', are depicted. But what about the setting? There's snow (it did snow, in some places on the front, on Boxing Day 1914), there's a robin sitting on barbed wire, all great cinema, but there's an absence of something. There's no blood or gore and no bodies lying in 'No Man's Land'. Does this matter? After all, the presence of these would hardly make for the Christmas 'feel good' factor of, for example, the John Lewis advert with the penguin. Sainsbury's have omitted those horrors and have indeed produced a masterpiece, but in the year we've started observing the centenary of the 'Great War', is it worthy of those commemorations? It looks back with nostalgia at moving, beautiful events, but should there be more recognition of the horrific butchery of trench warfare. In many places the slaughter continued throughout Christmas, there was no truce, and thousands died.

Many of the letters written at the time record a situation far removed from the images of the Sainsbury's advert. In many places the contact that opposing forces had came when they ventured into 'No Man's Land' to retrieve bodies and body parts. Maybe some recognition of this should have been included. But let's not dismiss it out of hand. There were encounters along the front of young men, similar in age and background, from different nations who were able to share what was important to them in acts of goodwill. Then they returned to killing each other! That highlights the futility of war and, at this time of year, that's always a message worthy of sharing.

Let's celebrate again the gift of Christ, the Prince of Peace!

