

In Britain
**THE LONG PATH
TO CAPE WRATH**

Jeroen Vogel

BOOKS BY JEROEN VOGEL

In Australia
In Vietnam
Baffling Banff
American Safari
In Britain

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For Bill Bryson.
Thank you for your inspiration.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeroen Vogel (Hoorn, the Netherlands, 1981) is a travel writer, blogger and adventurer. Since the age of 18, he's been travelling around the world and has published six books about his journeys. In 2015 he travelled through the Americas on public transport from the polar bears to the penguins. Three years later he became the first person ever to walk "The Bryson Line" through the United Kingdom.

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Chapter 1

Britain began at Brussels South Station. Its government insisted on a hard border in the middle of the idealistic European capital – on paper, anyway. In reality, neither the Belgian nor the British customs agent seemed to care much.

‘Why didn’t you go through the gates?’ asked the lady in the British booth, casually waving her hand at the metal stiles with passport scanners for “registered travellers.”

‘Because I didn’t know I could.’

She quickly glimpsed at my passport. ‘Well, now you know for next time,’ she said, already staring at the next person in line as she handed me back my document.

The terminal slowly filled with people dragging roller cases and carrying heavy-looking bags. The wait-

ing area for the Eurostar train to London looked dated with its light-grey tiles; its stuffiness reminded me of a crowded and dirty Asian bus terminal. But the toilets were clean. In my state of tiredness – I'd only slept a couple of hours – I happily spent a dreamy fifteen minutes taking my morning crap. A long line of frustrated men had formed outside the three stalls when I left.

I greeted them with a grin. 'Gentlemen.'

'They gave me a hard time at customs,' said the Australian pensioner in the seat next to me as the Eurostar train departed. I guessed his name was Arthur Waters. He travelled alone and had been to Turkey, where his great-uncle had fought and perished in the ill-fated Battle of Gallipoli. Mr. Waters had been to the grave. Why, the customs agent had wondered, should an Australian – a man alone – go to Turkey and then onwards to the United Kingdom? 'She kept asking me about it and I just kept answering: "I've been to my great-uncle's grave."' That woman had no sense of history,' he said, shaking his head pitifully.

'She barely looked at my passport,' I said. 'Apparently, I'm a registered traveller.'

'Are you going to the UK for business? On holiday?'

I leaned back and thought it over. 'I suppose you could call it an extended holiday. I'm going to walk the length of Britain. It will take a few months.'

Mr. Waters raised an eyebrow. 'How did you come up with that idea?'

More people would ask me this. And, it's a fair

question. This seemingly foolish idea had taken root in May 2016, two years earlier, while reading Bill Bryson's latest travel book: *The Road to Little Dribbling*.

'I know Bill Bryson,' said Mr. Waters, 'but I have not read that book.'

'Well, the book starts with a line he drew between Bognor Regis and Cape Wrath.'

Arthur Waters shrugged and shook his head unknowingly. 'Never heard of these places.'

'One is in the south; the other is in the north. He drew a line between the two, claiming that this is the longest possible distance one can travel in the United Kingdom in a straight line without crossing salt water. He calls it "The Bryson Line." I'm going to walk it.'

Mr. Waters looked confused. 'So, are you retracing Bill Bryson's footsteps?'

'No,' I said. 'That's the weird thing. He went all over England and Wales while doing multiple day trips. But he never travelled along his own Line. In the last chapter, he boards a night train to Scotland and visits Cape Wrath.'

'In the last chapter?'

I nodded. 'Hm.'

Reading the book had left me wondering what a continuous journey from one end of the island to the other would reveal about Britain – its human architecture, eccentricities, landscape, history, the island nation mentality. I wanted to write *that* book.

I also wondered what the Brits were like at home. Until two days earlier, I manned the front desk at a busy hotel in the city centre of Amsterdam. The giant hordes of drunk, British loudmouths with which the

locals, hospitality workers and police officers were confronted surely could not represent a national character. Britain would be in ruins. Paul Theroux wrote in *The Kingdom by The Sea* (1982) that the British “were like a tribe that plundered abroad and were secretive and inhospitable at home.” And it’s hard to think otherwise when you walk through Amsterdam – the yelling; the excessive drinking; the littering; the urinating. You could call it a form of plundering, colonising. Perhaps the British considered Amsterdam their new convict colony – all the nation’s retards were sent overseas in order for civilised inhabitants to enjoy their lovely, green island.

The Eurostar whisked us through the Belgian and French countryside – green, rolling hills – and past the high, barb-wired fences surrounding the tunnel entrance. In a 1929 article in *Popular Mechanics*, titled *New Plan for Channel Tunnel*, the fear was “expressed that quick and comfortable train journeys would make England a holiday resort for hordes of more or less undesirable people, who would introduce foreign customs, deface the countryside and otherwise interrupt English habits of living.” Inhospitable at home, plundering abroad. After it had gone dark for thirty minutes, Arthur Waters looked relieved at the familiar signs in a familiar language, even though he saw Britain for the first time with his own eyes.

‘Here they drive on the correct side of the road, unlike you guys from the continent,’ he expressed his sentiments.

‘We drive on the *right* side of the road,’ I joked back at him.

I looked at the wet landscape. It resembled the green, rolling hills back in Belgium and France. A busy motorway ran alongside the railway tracks. Rain swept against the windows. England looked far from promising. I could only hope that Bill Bryson was right when he wrote so beautifully towards the end of *The Road to Little Dribbling* that “there’s isn’t a landscape in the world that is more artfully worked, more lovely to behold, more comfortable to be in, than the countryside of Great Britain.” After all, I’d be spending a great deal of time in that landscape.

It was considerably colder in London than on the continent.

‘Apparently,’ said Mr. Wiley to his wife as we all walked to the end of the Eurostar platform, ‘it’s only six degrees here.’

For me, London was just this station and the platform where I took a train to East Croydon. There I changed one more time. Five relatively short train rides separated Hoorn, my hometown just north of Amsterdam, from Bognor Regis. It had stopped raining by the time I arrived around 2pm.

I walked flawlessly from the station to the pier – I had done this at least a dozen times before on Google Streetview. In every street were several houses for sale or for rent. The town had always been a fishing village. This changed after 1752. Dr. Richard Russell (1687-1759) and other doctors of his time promoted sea-bathing and drinking seawater as a healthy activity. Seaside towns became popular destinations. Bognor turned from a fishing village into one of Britain’s so-called watering places. None of the splen-

dour seemed to remain now. Hotel The Royal stood abandoned opposite the pier, decaying. Once a luxury hotel, these days the paint peeled. The glass front door had been smashed. The “bed” of a homeless man, now absent, lay on the porch.

I walked along the promenade and the uncomfortable-looking stony shingly beach with its wooden groynes to my hotel. The sky cleared up. I could see the coast in the western distance, as flat as a pancake. It bent off towards Selsey. I only counted two seagulls. In the few months preceding my departure, I’d tried to locate Camelot Guesthouse, where Mr. Theroux had stayed on his trip, fruitlessly. “Mrs. Pottage,” as the landlady was called in a travel book full of fake names, had certainly retired, along with her guesthouse. But The Navigator overlooked the English Channel. I deemed its seafaring name appropriate for this inland journey.

‘You all right?’ asked the lady who worked the bar in its cosy pub.

I liked it immediately – the laidback atmosphere, the elderly local people having a pint while gazing out across the English Channel, the decoration, and the very British way I’d been greeted. I checked in and was taken upstairs to a simple room with a single bed.

‘I’m here because of that book, *The Road to Little Dribbling* by Bill Bryson,’ I said to James Huber’s question while eating a hamburger with chips and salad that evening. Next to my plate stood a pint of dark beer. Mr. Huber enjoyed his second glass of red wine at the next table. Like Arthur Waters, he knew the author’s

name but had never heard of the book. I explained my ordeal again.

His mouth fell open. ‘You are *walking* to Cape Wrath?’ he exclaimed in a high-pitched voice. ‘That’s...’

His reaction made me feel like I was bragging.

‘I’m not the only one doing this,’ I hastened to say. ‘There’s a group of American expats walking the other way. They are starting at Cape Wrath and walking down to the pier here in Bognor Regis.’

Yes, more people had come up with this idea. The Americans owned and worked for a “wealth management firm” focusing on American expats in the UK with tax obligations back home. Wealth Managers. They wanted to walk the Bryson Line to “give back to their adopted home” by raising £100,000 to split between five UK-based charities. Therefore, they needed to create a bandwagon. They’d claimed “The Bryson Line” as a .com domain. They had also attached that name to Twitter and Facebook accounts with their firm’s name worked into the header – it felt like a noble publicity stunt.

There were some crucial differences in our approaches to the same idea. They were going to walk the equivalent of the length of the Bryson Line; I would literally walk from Bognor Regis to Cape Wrath. They gave themselves a timeframe of thirty days to complete their walk, averaging 19 miles per day; I had no time limit. They were with seven of them (with three group members doing the full 569 miles) and had people walking along on different parts of their hike; I’d be on my own. They even had

someone transporting their luggage for them; I carried everything myself. They were very focal about their undertaking as they needed to raise funds; I just wrote a letter to Bill Bryson and told my friends.

Yet we had this same idea, conceived on opposite sides of the North Sea. We were going to walk at about the same time, too. I thought we should get in touch. So, about four months earlier, I wrote them a cheery message on Twitter: “@Thebrysonline Hello, fellow walkers! We might run into each other somewhere along the B-Line. Wishing you all the best!”

There came no response. Perhaps they didn’t quite know what to do with me. Maybe they thought that I’d rock their emerging bandwagon. As a cheeky reminder that Mr. Bryson had written in his book that he wanted his line to become *generally* known as “The Bryson Line,” I – an inspired reader – used the same hashtag (#walkthebrysonline) as the Wealth Managers.

‘But,’ I said, ‘I do think that going from Bognor Regis to the wilds of Scotland is the right order. South to north – from suburbia to the last wilderness in Britain.’

Mr. Huber, who was in his mid-forties, nodded. ‘It *is* the last wilderness in Britain.’ He went to Cape Wrath every year and witnessed increased popularity ‘because of people like Bill Bryson. There are every year more and more motorhomes. But it’s not like John O’Groats.’ He turned to face me directly. ‘John O’Groats has nothing on Cape Wrath! And you’ve chosen the best season. When you get to Scotland in June, you’ve got nineteen hours of daylight. Nah mate, you’re walking in the right direction. South to north!’

Just be aware of the midges!’ He pulled a face and said with much emphasis, ‘They will eat you alive! When you’re sleeping in a bothy, they’ll stay at the door. They don’t come in like mosquitos, but there will be millions in front of the door, just like a wall. And you will have to walk through it.’ He shrugged. ‘Just use repellent.’ He then got up to order another glass of red wine.

The more wine Mr. Huber drank, the more often he said how ‘fantastic’ this whole undertaking would be and how ‘beautiful’ my destination was. ‘You’ll love it up there, mate! Cape Wrath is be-au-ti-ful! You *got* to visit the cave just outside Durness. Smoo Cave, it’s called.’ When he went again to the bar to order, he said to a table full of locals, pointing at me, ‘That guy is going to walk from Bognor Regis to Cape Wrath! He based it on this book by Bill Bryson!’

An elderly man left the table ten minutes later. He faced me at the exit and said, raising his thumb, ‘Good luck with your walk!’

The weather had cleared. On this beautiful, sunny morning, I stood on the pier and took a selfie. I had chosen the pier as my starting point. It was Bognor Regis’ only manmade feature that extended into the English Channel while on Cape Wrath the lighthouse was the only manmade structure – thus, The Bryson Line ran from the pier to the lighthouse, 568.6 miles apart.

I had fantasised about following the line literally. It meant having to walk through living rooms and enclosed backyards and cross bodies of water, including

Loch Ness (“Holy crap! So, you do exist!”). Impossible, of course. I had to come up with my own route. I’d used a website called waymarkedtrails.org to select long-distance walking trails which stayed close to The Bryson Line *and* went in the right direction. The empty spaces between the ends and starts of such trails were filled in with directions from Google Maps. The result was the Route Book – printed and spiral-bound at my local print shop.

I looked at the calm sea beneath me. This was it – I stood at the start of The Bryson Line. Bill Bryson had written me a letter wishing me the best of luck with this “slightly crazy ambition.” He had devoted himself to the Wealth Managers’ walk, though he was with me on paper, as a writer does, tucked away in my backpack. Literally the entire island stretched out in front of me. “Every journey of 1,000 miles starts with one single step,” said Lao Tzu.

I stepped off the pier and into Bognor Regis. I felt liberated. Pure happiness. I’d quit my job. I had no house. I just had to walk. Life couldn’t be simpler. I strode through the dull residential streets – town houses and bungalows – of Bognor Regis. Then I left town along a busy road with a combined foot and cycle path. The flat, coastal area made the going easy. The weight of the pack didn’t bother me at all, contrary to what I’d expected. I made it to Chichester in less than two hours.

Chichester was quaint and cosy. It seemed a comfortable town in which to live, perhaps raise a family. I turned left into Canon Lane and picked up the New Lipchis Way, the first of more than twenty

waymarked trails I'd follow. There had been no way-marker. The creator of this trail, Keith McKenna, had written in an email that the City of Chichester had allowed for barely any waymarkers within the city centre. He'd drawn an arrow on a city map for me. I could see the cathedral from Canon Lane, its huge spire towering above the flint garden walls and plastered houses.

I remembered having to go through the Bishop Palace's Gardens and then along a street called Westgate to pick up a so-called rail trail, a dismantled railway line converted into a straight and level footpath. There were an estimated 2,200 miles of rail trails in the United Kingdom, resulting from the Beeching Cuts in the 1960s when 5,000 miles of railway line were closed due to austerity measures. This particular line had been the Chichester to Midhurst line: opened in 1881; closed in 1951; dismantled in 1993. Old brick bridges – many of them no longer serving a purpose – still contained the soot from the steam locomotives. These were a relic from the days when even the tiniest villages were connected to the rail system – a national ideal that proved unsustainable.

I passed a school with an enormous sports field where young teens ran warm for the upcoming P.E. session. A boy did a double backflip. I felt like that, figuratively speaking. Amidst dog walkers with jobs to go back to, I felt like this free-spirited boy in the midst of his obligingly running classmates.

A duck and her five yellow-brown, hairy ducklings swam in the shallow River Lavant that meandered across a farm field at the foot of the very first

hill I'd be climbing. But the hill could only be climbed if I traversed a privately-owned farm field with sheep in it. In the Netherlands, that would be trespassing. In England, where the public right of way stood in high regard, you could even bring your dog along. Seeing me, mother sheep started bleating; their lambs responded. The bleating would become the soundtrack of this walk, all the way from south to north. The lambs awaited my arrival bravely but ran sheepishly after their fleeing mothers whenever I came too close. Once they'd fled to safety, the lambs always started to suckle.

At the gate at the top of the hill, I found the first New Lipchis Way's waymarker. Reassured, I stared at the rail trail down below. It had been the first climb and further up it went; but these rolling hills were never steep or particularly taxing. I passed the immense horse racing track of Goodwood with its flags and grandstand from above and descended to Singleton. With its houses with thatched roofs, old brick cottages and narrow and quiet streets, it looked like a fairytale village from the Middle Ages. It was set in a bowl of green hills, surrounded by grazing cows and forests. Its phone box – not a traditional red box but a modern one – now contained the village defibrillator.

It was 17:30 – dinnertime. Besides, my neophyte feet were sore after their first 15.5 miles. I decided to stay here for the night. Singleton had no hotel or campsite, but The Partridge Inn had a beer garden.

'Just put your tent up at the end of it,' Mark, the owner, said.

I gratefully accepted his invitation.

In spite of four pints of beer, I slept terribly that night. The self-inflatable mattress had not self-inflated. The rain pounded on the canvas until 5:45am. I ate one slice of toast with two slices of salami, packed up, strapped the wet tent to the side of the pack and set off again.

The sky remained dark-grey and threatening. I walked into a forest where the heavy machinery of tree fellers had turned the forest paths into a series of deep, impassable cracks. Entire patches of forest had been cleared and replaced with squelching mud puddles. I could neither walk on the paths nor around them; the higher positioned sides of the trails were slippery quagmires. It started to rain again. Hard and without breaks. I got drenched and often felt my feet slip into a mud puddle. Add to all this the crankiness induced by my severe lack of sleep and the dullest imagination can picture the fun I was having.

Where the New Lipchis Way crossed the South Downs Way, there was a sign on a fence from the Unicorn Inn at Heyshott ("twenty minutes from here") that smiled at me and said, "Open all day Tuesday-Saturday." I walked – no, flew – down a steep path on the other side of the field, crossed yet another field with light-brown muddy soil, and could barely make it out of a third field where one humongous, deep mud pool blocked the entire width of the gate. I'd been in the rain for several hours, but here in Heyshott, they had an inn that was open all day.

A lady in a car gave me a friendly smile as she drove off. I liked this hamlet already. And there was

the inn! I hurried towards it and then stood still. My mouth fell open; my head tilted sideways. ‘No...’ A bolt from the blue – the inn was closed. I stood before it in the pouring rain, distraughtly. The village had no shop; no bus shelter; no place to hide. A fingerpost sign with a New Lipchis Way-waymarker happily pointed at yet *another* field full of mud. I took a moment to sum up the entire curse word dictionary and then just shrugged, moving on. *Mustn’t grumble.*

A lady walked her dogs around the edges of this field. She was all smiles.

‘Midhurst isn’t far from here,’ she told me.

A creek of more than a metre wide on the edge of the next forest raged across the footpath. I sighed. Would there be a hotel in Midhurst? I launched my 132 kilos (115.5kg bodyweight plus the backpack) across the water. The mud splashed up against my pants as I landed. And onwards it went – balancing on slippery edges, avoiding thorn bushes, walking with my feet on both sides of a narrow track with the rain water flowing between my legs. I progressed very slowly. Even my waterproof shoes got soaked. I reached Midhurst at 10:50am. The town had a hotel – I called it a day. It felt impossible to keep morale high. Why bother, anyway?

The Spread Eagle Hotel happened to be a luxury hotel, occupied by people who were all neatly dressed – men in tuxedos and black leather shoes; women in elegant dresses and on heels – much the opposite of a man soaked through to the skin carrying a dripping backpack, tent strapped to the side, and leaving mud prints all over the doormat. I approached the front

desk. The young receptionist, Maude Burt, awaited my arrival with anxiety; her older supervisor, Matilda Vaughn, gave me the thousand-yard stare.

‘You were walking in the rain, right?’ said Matilda Vaughn with a teasing little smile, playing fast and loose. ‘You got absolutely drenched and decided to stop for the day, right? You’re looking for a nice hot shower or a bath, right?’

I nodded slowly. This chick had a very strange way of welcoming potential guests.

‘I can read your mind, right?’

I mumbled, ‘I must be an open book.’

She turned on her desk chair to face her computer, leaving Maude to deal with me.

Maude Burt said, ‘The normal price for a luxury room is £229, but because’ – Matilda Vaughn held her fingers still on her keyboard, awaiting the answer – ‘of availability and because this is last-minute, I can give it to you for £149.’ She gave me an expectant look.

‘Perfect.’

Immediately, as though stung by a bee, Matilda Vaughn swung back round with a professional smile. ‘You’re more than welcome to use all our facilities, Sir. We have a spa and a swimming pool, which you can also use the whole day on the day of check out. We’ll just check to see if your room is ready, Sir.’

It was.

The area between comfort and luxury can be grey but becomes pretty black-and-white when you consider a bunk bed in a hostel dormitory to be comfortable and a curtained four-poster bed, like the hideous thing I found in my room, to be luxury. I wondered