

Ruth Broadbent

From town to countryside (a walk)

City Centre 12 May 2018

***A walk from town to countryside (Crouch Hill, Oxfordshire, UK)
walked by Ruth Broadbent and Rhiannon Evans***



Blocked path

Blake Morris is walking each of the walks from *Ways to Wander* by Clare Qualmann and Claire Hind (Triarchy Press, 2015) and inviting others from around the world to either walk with him in person, or remotely. This particular walk was *City Centre* by Tom Hall. Following the instructions for the walk, I set off to walk out of town, turning back when we crossed the boundary from town to countryside at Crouch Hill and the ancient track, Salt Way, that borders this edge of the town. En route I met up with another artist, Rhiannon Evans to accompany me on the walk. Rhiannon has done a lot of artwork on Crouch Hill so I was

delighted that she could join me. We were also joined by over 50 others who were interpreting the walk in different locations around the world. The occasional ping of my phone with updates from these other walking artists added an extra dimension to our walk.

For the start and end of the walk, I walked alone in silence, writing down any observations on paper. Walking together, I made some brief notes but mostly we observed, listened, explored and discussed our encounters along the way. An unexpected feature of this walk was boundaries and barriers. With a new housing estate being built, we found that the old and well-worn permissive tracks regularly used by locals and dog walkers have been closed off, and where they would have come out on Crouch Hill is now being reclaimed by brambles and foliage, as well as the occasional piece of litter. Barriers marked the boundary of the new estate. After coffee and chocolate by the trig point on Crouch Hill, commenting on how the view is beginning to change, we noticed a dog walker crossing the field below that we had tried and failed to enter. We decided to find their route in, so descending onto Salt Way, a track bordered by trees and fields (and also currently undergoing a transformation in parts as new estates are built outside of this boundary line to the town), we walked along it to the main road back into town. With the traffic noise returning, we searched the field hedgerow and ditch for a place to enter. Just as we approached the start of town once again, a small gap in the hedge revealed itself, a new path created as old ones close. I look forward to seeing how the paths continue to shift and change as people and animals make new tracks up to the hill.

Along the way I took square photographs of the ground, documenting the shift in surface. This connects with my current artwork, in particular *A Line Across England*, where I take rubbings of the ground surface as I follow lines on foot or by bicycle. Although this walk started in town in an urban area full of tarmac surfaces, I searched out any patches of grass to walk on, from verges to strips between carriageways. Plenty of grass areas and trees cover a particular area of the walk, originally designed as part of a social housing project, and fortunately still continue to exist. Gradually the smooth urban manicured grass, punctuated by the ruts created by urban domestic cars, changed to undulations in the track more familiar to the countryside. Sounds changed along the way with birdsong present throughout and traffic and human activity fading in and out. Although a familiar route that I have walked many times, the nature of this event meant that it became a slow and contemplative walk, adding new resonances that will continue to echo on my future wanders in this area.

The following text and photographs record the surface of the ground and accompanying observations as I walked. The photographs are organised in three lines, the first and last are the solo start sections of the walk, and the second central column is walking together up and down the hill. The text is as I wrote it at the time, with some minor edits added a few days later. (Click images to enlarge).

From town to countryside (a walk)

*I'm off
Ground rubbing taken
Victorian terraced housing
Tiles and tarmac
Birdsong
Fallen blossom on pavement
Meet a neighbour, have a chat
Cross the road
Past the pothole
Follow the line, the tarmac line
Find grassy areas in front of houses, walk on these
Along edges and borders
Around bins in pavement
Listen to music from a house, the sound of a football being kicked in street
The sound of approaching fast cars as approach a main road
Walk along grassy centre strip of busy road, ducking under trees
Hot and sunny, cool and shady
Able to isolate birdsong from cars
Blackbird hops ahead of me
Follow its line
It flies off
Red dog bins, an urban sign
Not in the fields yet
Crossed sticks on the grass – a sign?
Uneven tracks in grass, a sign of parking cars
Not yet in tractor land
Smile at a pedestrian on a crossing
She looks at the ground, watches her step
Walk on freshly mown grass by pavement
Head out of town on main road to the fields
Is it public or private? Am I trespassing? Who owns these patches of grass?
Past the bus stop
Loud lorry passes by
Past two pedestrians and a dog walker, say hello
Cars zoom by loudly
Road on left has the hill in its name, first sign of it, am getting closer
Collect a friend to join me to the hill and back
Out of the town and into the countryside
Blocked ways
New estate being built
Can't get into field
Bump into some ex-students, have a chat
Walk through the houses, on the road, find another route
Alley way
Into the park
Views at last
Head for familiar track through the trees
Blocked paths. Fences and Barriers. Old routes overgrown. Litter
Scramble through the brambles
As old tracks are lost, new ones are created
Re-join track to the hill
A thermos of coffee with chocolate and chat
Ground rubbing by hilltop trig point
Observe the changing view
Watch dog walker in field below
How did they get in?
Off to investigate
Walk across field down to ancient Salt Way track
Between the trees and fields
Stony muddy track beneath our feet
Back to noise of main road
Looking for new ways in
Verge, ditch and hedgerow
Find a new way in
Boundaries, borders, barriers
As old tracks are closed, new ones appear
Follow the patches of grass between the tarmac and pavements back into town
Back under the cool shady trees and along the sunny open grass strip
Kick through the freshly mown grass
The sound of it audible through traffic noise either side
Hear a twig snap underfoot
Two bicycles whirr past
Up and down over kerbs
Round the bins (still on pavement)
Loud birdsong
People
Back past the pothole
Home*

Ruth Broadbent

12 May 2018 (Crouch Hill, Oxfordshire, UK)
6.4km, 9,243 steps



Rhiannon's writing on our walk is as follows:

A wander up Crouch Hill – with Ruth Broadbent – Saturday 12th May 2018

It was strange. Just when I was feeling disconnected, came the request. Ruth asked if I'd like to join her and others, globe-wide, on a walk. Hers was going to be up Crouch Hill.

I'd almost finishing reading Patti Smith's *M train* and already feeling the sense of loss associated with 'missing a book' before I had even finished it, so, of course, I said 'yes'.

When Ruth arrived, I suggested we follow the route I had, at one time, taken so very frequently, almost daily.

It felt recent, until I started walking that day, but actually was months ago. Perhaps not since the building work began, I guess.

As we approached the site and I felt like a traitor. I thought it looked smarter, somehow; tidy.

But when we reached the gateway into the big field I was shocked and hurt. Our way up, alongside the hedge, along the headland, so familiar; was blocked.

There was a high metal construction fence with notices about consideration and respect. I felt excluded, and imprisoned.

We turned back and went the road-way.

Within minutes, a joyful coincidence – seeing excited faces and waving from a white van parked on the kerb. A mixture of anxiety and anticipation was palpable; exuded by parents and son through the van. Shared feelings of loss and gain were visible through the window, and as they moved on, so did we.

Discussing routes, ownership and permissions, we walked slowly upwards across the mown grass to scrappy woodland. As we searched for paths we'd both walked before, but separately, we made our way through; clambering over branches, caught in brambles, stumbling, finding mossy roots and glimpses of sky; caught in a tale of mystery from time ago.

We rambled this way for sometime (or was it just a few minutes?) emerging almost where we entered, but changed, as in all good tales of wanders and discovery.

Our discoveries were banks of earth, high and newly pushed upwards; fences old and young, wood and metal; and detritus bottles, cans; and a fragment of 'vintage lino', which I carried home, and kept as a treasure for my 'collection'.

Reaching the more familiar path, the hawthorn was overgrown from few passings over the long winter and wet spring. Slippery paths and uneven descents have claimed ankles and wrists in their time. Maybe these routes are less popular with dog-walkers now; no passable route down the hill to the road, anymore?

On the summit we sat, ate and drank, reflected and 'supposed'- seeing the ingress of the development below into the next precious field.

I thought I saw a friend, Louise with her dogs. Trying to find a way through to the road, near the old way. I called her- but it wasn't. She was in her garden, not visible, half- a mile or so away.

Ruth used an app. to help us name the hills. The sun shone determinedly bright on the screen making the text difficult to read and our decisions, unconvincing.

We returned by walking back down the hill to the West and took the Salt Way to Giant's Cave. Along the main road back to my house we looked for new paths through the hedge, formed by others. This was for future reference, giving access, once more, to the big field, a way up the headland, through rough boundary gaps, to the top. It seemed the right thing to do.

Not far from some pre-cut, carefully laid new turf and a neatly cleared ditch, we found one.

For more information about this project, my work or Rhiannon's:

Ruth Broadbent: www.ruthbroadbent.com and on [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [Page](#) [Instagram](#)
[Blog at a-n blogs 'all or nothing'](#) (the above article posted on this blog 18 May 2018)

Rhiannon Evans [Twitter](#) and blog at <https://vectorcatalyst.wordpress.com/2016/08/31/public-viewprivate-view/> and <https://vectorcatalyst.wordpress.com/2016/08/15/a-disturbing-pre-occupation/>

Blake Morris: [A Wander Is Not a Slog](#) (includes an invitation to join him in a walk and links to the participants of this walk) #awanderisnotaslog