

# Traces in the *landscape*

Tracy Spiers explores the rich and diverse traces in our Cotswold landscape

*There's beauty all around our paths, if but our watchful eyes can trace it midst familiar things, and through their lowly guise.*

English poet Felicia Hemans 1793–1835

I have come to the conclusion that often it is my children who lead me, rather than the other way round. In certain situations they have no fear. They whizz down the steepest of death slides without a second thought while their mother takes one look over the edge, whimpers and freezes. Yet because they go before me, with their encouragement I have followed. They also notice the little things – the amazing artistry in the sky, a bird song, a beautiful view, the tiniest of insect and the latest spider to add to the Spiers collection. I am so grateful for that because they make me look again at the wonderful creation around us.

It is thanks to my two eldest daughters that I have completed the popular 21 circular Five Valleys Walk in aid of the National Meningitis Trust twice. In year 6, aged just 10 years old, they decided to walk the entire stretch over hill and dale for charity. It opened my eyes to really appreciate the 'beauty all around our paths', despite the fact I wore the wrong shoes for the first trek and ceremoniously threw the culprits away at the end. I lost my entire toe nail collection and had an impressive blister display. The only way I could complete the course was to follow the person in front, one step at a time. I almost bounced round last year in comparison.

This is but one walk. There's a plethora from which to choose. The Thames Path National Trail, follows the route of the Thames from its source close to Cirencester to the Thames Barrier near its outlet to the sea; The Cotswold Way, a 102-mile trail, starts at Chipping Campden, passing through picturesque towns and villages such as Broadway, Stanton, Winchcombe and Painswick and ends at Bath in Somerset; the Severn Way follows the River Severn from its source at

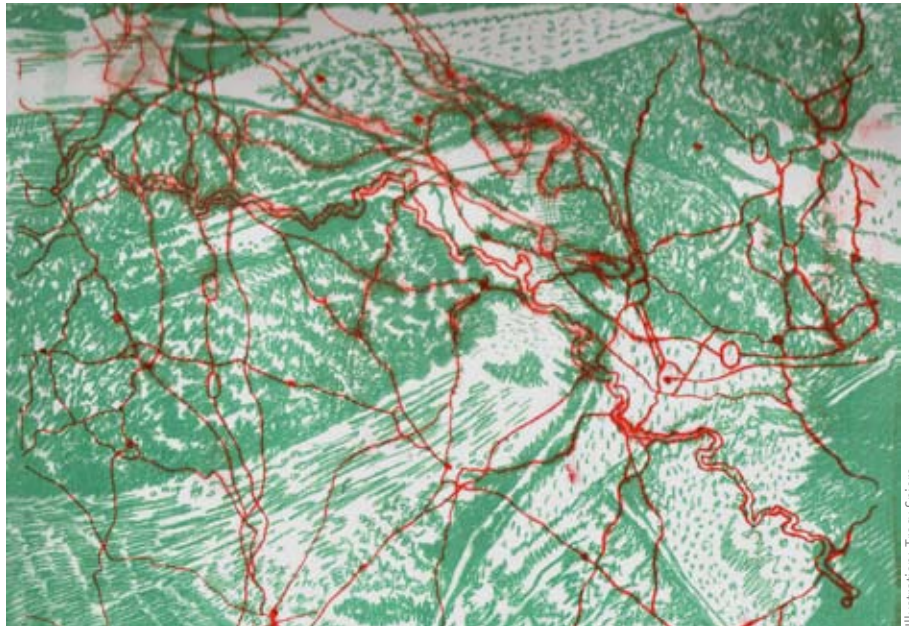


Illustration: Tracy Spiers

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Plynlimon, Wales to the mouth at Bristol; The Oxfordshire Way, which starts at Bourton-on-the-Water and wends its way through west and south Oxfordshire to Henley-on-Thames and there are endless canal walks to enjoy.

There is something amazing about walking the paths in the Cotswolds. We know hundreds of ramblers have walked these paths before us and hundreds will walk in the footprints we leave. I find that exciting. The word 'wolds' means gentle hillsides, although many of us living on steep slopes would argue with the interpretation of gentle! The Cotswolds landscape, designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty from 1966, has a strong geological foundation as it lies upon one of the best known section of Oolitic limestone. Its rolling, open, high wold plateaux are moulded by physical and human influences. Evidence of early

settlements reveals traces of the past. Over 100 burial grounds from the Neolithic era are scattered throughout the Cotswolds such as Nymphsfield Long Barrow and Hetty Peglar's Tump in the Stroud district; Belas Knap near Winchcombe; Notgrove Long Barrow, west of Bourton-on-the-Water and Fairspear Natural Burial Ground, near Witney.

The remarkably straight Roman roads, particularly the Fosse Way are crucial legacies left by our ancestors and still obvious all over the Cotswold landscape. Evidence of their being here are all around. There's Chedworth Roman Villa between Cirencester and Northleach; Great Witcombe Roman Villa, southeast of Gloucester; Roman Baths in Bath, beneath which are well-preserved remains of the Roman spa town of Aquae Sulis; Cirencester Amphitheatre and of course Corinium Museum in Cirencester.

There are traces of the past everywhere, but every time we make our mark in the rich tapestry of countryside, we are adding yet another layer of existence. I guess the key is not to leave too much evidence that we have been there to ensure our beautiful landscape stays unspoilt for future generations. I just recommend wearing the right footwear when you go! ■