

# Walking into our Memories

**Philip Williams talks us through his 6,000 mile charity walk round the coastline of Britain to raise money for Alzheimer's Society & Alzheimer Scotland.**

Britain has some of the most beautiful and varied coastline anywhere in the world. It contours 7,500 miles of beaches, cliffs, mountains and moorland. It winds around estuaries, marshes and villages and meanders through industrial landscapes, towns and cities. There are hidden gems and global landmarks to explore along its shores. Whether you're a permanent resident or an occasional visitor, the coastline is so often the source of truly memorable experiences.

In 2010 I set out to walk around the British coastline as a tribute to my mother, who had dementia, and to raise money for Alzheimer's. My 6,000-mile adventure started at Brighton Pier and took three and a half years and six pairs of walking boots to complete.

I plodded along the coast in sections, taking breaks so I could earn money. It was an opportunity for me to explore the hidden nooks and crannies of our coast, chat to some of the characters who live along it and record some of their memories. Meeting people from all walks of life, hearing stories about their ancestors, their childhood and life experiences, inspired me to start my own business, 'About Me For You', recording our memories and life stories so they can be shared with our families and captured for future generations.

The very first person I interviewed on my walk was the late Sir Patrick Moore, who lived in Selsey on the West Sussex coast. He had moved there after the war, attracted by its seaside location and clear skies - an additional bonus for an astronomer. Dressed in an orange kaftan, Sir Patrick's mind was as sharp as ever, and his eyes had a mischievous sparkle, accentuated by his signature monocle. He was best-known for presenting the 'Sky at Night' for 55 years. "I only missed one episode, and that's when I got food poisoning from a Quail's egg!", he told me. He was a talented music composer and accomplished musician, who played the piano and xylophone. He had written over 100 books on the keys of his beloved 1908 Woodstock typewriter that was now set aside in his study. After our conversation, I shook his hand as I was leaving and realised that I was holding a hand that had, in turn, shaken those of Orville Wright, Neil Armstrong and accompanied Albert Einstein on the piano as he played his violin. I had been in the company of someone who had also touched us all as a nation and brought space into our living rooms.





Continuing westwards along the South West Coast Path, a National Trail running from Poole in Dorset via Land's End to Minehead in Somerset, I met four generations of a family who were all lobster fishermen. The youngest, David, who was in his early twenties, had returned to the tiny Cornish fishing hamlet from a job in a city to join his father, Ian, and help run the family's lobster boat. David's great-grandfather, Ernest, was 98 and remembered hauling aboard bumper catches of both lobster and crab. The fishing continued well throughout the working life of his son Edward, until his grandson, Ian, (David's father), had to sell the boat as there weren't enough lobsters to provide a living. Then in more recent years, thanks to marine conservation work carried out to re-establish and conserve the lobster population along that section of the coast, Ian decided to buy a new boat and go back into the 'lobster business' with his son. In David's words, "From the internet to the fishing net - or lobster pot to be precise!".

As my journey progressed, it occurred to me that so many of the stories people were telling me had never been recorded or written down. In some cases, they had never been shared with the family

and could become lost stories. So, when people started to contact me and ask whether they could have a copy of the recorded conversations for their archive, I was delighted to be able to do so.

Following the spectacular Pembrokeshire coast in Wales, I continued to Cardigan, where I met Cyril, long retired after earning a living catching salmon in the River Teifi. Paddling his 'coracle' - a tiny boat which reminded me of an upturned turtle shell - he would lay a 'seine net' in a large arc and then, with help from his companions, haul the bulging net of fresh-run salmon into the shallows and onto the bank. Some of the salmon he caught were longer than the coracle he had been floating in. Cyril tied salmon flies and gave me a pattern with which to try my luck if I ever had the chance to fish later in my walk. I did use it, in Scotland, and I hooked a salmon with it.

The west coast of Scotland was a highlight of the walk for me. Remote and rugged, it gave me a sense of isolation and self-sufficiency, qualities possessed by many of the people who live along it. John and Kay lived in a lighthouse on Cape Wrath on the remote north-western tip of Scotland.

Just before Christmas a few years ago, Kay went off to Inverness to do the Christmas shopping. Shortly after she left, it started to snow - very heavily. So much so that she couldn't get back home for weeks. During that time, the supply of coal ran out, the generator broke down, and John was forced onto a diet of baked beans and pasta. His springer spaniels were his only company for Christmas Day, New Year's Eve and his birthday and all he had to feed them on were emergency army rations.

Once I turned the corner at John o' Groats, my southwards journey became easier along more level terrain. Weeks later, I headed down the beautiful coast of Norfolk and on into Suffolk, and it was here that someone asked me whether I would return after my walk and record their parents' life stories, and I gladly agreed. I was cheered across the finish line of my 6,000 mile walk by a group of family, friends and well-wishers at Brighton Pier in September 2013. It is a day I shall never forget. By then, I had raised over £60,000 for Alzheimer's Society and Alzheimer Scotland, and my fundraising efforts continue to this day. I had experienced a genuine sense of adventure and met so many fascinating and generous-spirited people along the way.

I returned to Suffolk as promised, commissioned to record the life story and memories of a retired financial consultant, which we did over a couple of very enjoyable days. A few weeks later, when we presented him with the presentation box containing his finished personal documentary and autobiography, he realised that what he was holding wasn't just a living record of his own memories, but the memories and stories of his parents and grandparents. By giving copies of his



film and book to his four adult children, he was ensuring that these precious stories would always be available for future generations to enjoy. Soon after this project finished, another family got in touch, asking if I could do the same for them. 'About Me For You' grew from there.

I now produce personal documentaries, autobiographies and audio interviews for individuals, couples and families all over the UK. The adage, "Everyone has a story to tell" is so true, and I love the fact that I can help people have fun and enjoy themselves while they do it. As part of





these projects, I scan, restore and convert old family photos and films and then transfer them onto disk. This has now become a standalone service for people and families who find themselves with boxes of old photo albums, slides and films that they want to bring together and capture in one place. My clients are from all walks of life and have included heads of established family businesses and first-generation entrepreneurs. One project came along when a family decided to sell its beautiful home in Hampshire with a trout stream running through the garden. They wanted a film made as a keepsake,

capturing the sights and sounds of the house, the river and beautiful grounds that had been lived in and enjoyed by so many generations. It featured each family member sharing their favourite memories and places around the house and its grounds. The river was a central theme to the flow of the film and provided an important and intimate backdrop to their story. As a memento of where they grew up, each member of the family now has a copy of the film, and they can also stream it online.



One of my recent projects took me back to the coast and my favourite coastal town, Salcombe, in south Devon, recording the life story of Mike, a traditional wooden boatbuilder. Filming and interviewing him with his wife, Jean, over a few months, I watched a modest man – a master of his craft – build and launch his last boat while explaining what his life had been like during his fifty-five years as a boatbuilder. It was heart-warming and inspiring to watch and film the sailing community come out to celebrate Mike's achievements in a 'sail past' which included dozens of boats that were built by him. It was a special and emotional occasion for everyone, and I was so happy that we were there to record the memories for them.

So, my long walk around our glorious coastline, helping people capture their memories, has led me to what I love doing now. If you have a story to tell and memories to share with your family and future generations, I will be delighted to help you.

**You can find out more by visiting [aboutmeforyou.co.uk](http://aboutmeforyou.co.uk).**