

The Manse, West Street, Oundle, Peterborough PE8 4EJ
Tel. 01832 274955

Re: The Walk to Rome 9 – 26 July 2009

Dear Parents and members of the **Upper & Lower Sixth**,

To walk cross-country from Siena to Rome, a distance off-road of roughly 180 miles, presents anyone with a considerable challenge. To do so in the height of summer weighed down with a rucksack, with little experience of sustained difficult walking, over the most demanding and often mountainous terrain presents any member of the departing VIth form with challenges, mental and physical, which exceed those they are likely to have encountered elsewhere. Those who choose to take part in this adventure find all their senses charged, even overwhelmed, by the astonishing variety and richness of landscape, architecture, fine art, gastronomy and viticulture of a region unsurpassed in historical significance for the whole of the Western World.

The Walk to Rome passes through a region unparalleled in its ever-changing wealth of beauty, unscathed by the ravages of industrialisation. Both Tuscany, where the trip begins, and Lazio, in the middle of which lies Rome, have preserved the continuity of cultural tradition and agrarian simplicity which accounts in part for their having remained the goal of travellers, civilised, barbarian, even Blairian, throughout the past two millennia. If one is to profit from the best of such splendours and hopes to gain an intimate sense of their secrets, no method of locomotion can equal the exhilaration derived from walking these ancient forgotten paths. We follow the abandoned tracks, byways, overgrown highways, long buried paths and chalk roads trodden by the soldiers, slaves, pilgrims, poets, writers and artists who made their arduous way to Rome in an age before internal combustion.

Such a trip will appeal only to a small number of those about to leave the school. Indeed, only sixteen places in total are on offer. Going by the experience of the past fifteen years of running this expedition for school-leavers, the Walk to Rome tends to attract individuals of a certain independence of character who respond instinctively and intelligently to the offer of true free-spirited adventure. A particular strength of mind and spirit proves itself rather more essential than any unusual physical robustness. In the latter terms the sole requirements for taking part successfully are health of body coupled with a well worn-in pair of walking boots and a large hat.

Though I wish it were otherwise, the trip has a financial cost: £1600. This is a substantial sum of money, though in terms of what each participant receives for this outlay the trip is hardly expensive. Included are: return air passage to Italy from London, all other incidental transport within Italy, all accommodation in comfortable and characterful family-run *pensionari* and hotels, all dinners - gourmet and gourmand - and breakfasts, all visits to museums, churches and sites of architectural and artistic interest which form part of the itinerary. The only specific expense *not* included is lunch: needs and appetites vary so enormously from one individual to another I consider it fairer to leave that cost to the purse, greed and moral conscience of each walker. The average sum spent ranges between an ascetic 20 pence and a gargantuan £5 a day.

With twenty-one years' experience of organising and leading this trip both for adults and for former pupils, over the past many years I had the privilege of running it also for school-leavers of Westminster School. However, owing to the extraordinary demand for places amongst Oundelians, the party of July '09, unlike those of July '00 - '07 will NOT be a joint venture for the two schools but, as in '08, for Oundelians alone.

Owing to the unusual nature of this trip, coupled with the consideration that all those who choose to participate in it, whatever their age, are by definition no longer members of their school by the time the expedition sets forth, I am at pains to emphasise that The Walk to Rome is technically NOT A SCHOOL TRIP. I organise and lead it with the full approval of the Headmaster, but from a legal point of view must make it clear beyond any possible confusion to any party involved that any individual signing up to take part must do so as an independent adult agreeing to assume full responsibility for his or her actions. As the author, organiser and leader I in turn exercise to the fullest possible degree my duty of care in every detail towards all members of the party, but do so as an expert private individual (with a total of twenty years' experience in this venture) and NOT as a commercial professional agent of any body, school or company.

Should the above and the attached detailed itinerary have any appeal to you and to your daughter / son, I invite you to complete the pro forma and send it to me with cheques as detailed on the pro-forma made payable to Timothy Watson. If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to write, ring or, preferably, contact me by e-mail on tdw@oundle.northants.sch.uk

Yours sincerely,

Timothy Watson
Sole organiser & leader

**Application form
for
Oundle School-leavers'
Walk to Rome - July 2009**

To: Timothy Watson

Name of Pupil: (as on passport)..... House:.....

- (i) I have read the information about the proposed *private trip* from Siena to Rome, 9 July - 26 July 2009 and I should like my daughter / son to take part in it and the activities included in the Detailed Itinerary. I declare that my daughter / son is fit enough to undertake the activities.
- (ii) I enclose £600 deposit (cheque made payable to Timothy Watson) and two further instalment cheques of £500 and £500 **post-dated** for (i) **1 March 2009** and (ii) **1 June 2009**.
- (iii) I undertake to arrange on behalf of my daughter / son **Travel Insurance** covering **Medical Emergency** treatment and costs, **Travel & baggage** costs and **Cancellation** costs and hereby indemnify Timothy Watson against any liability and extraordinary costs beyond that which falls within his specific duty of care towards my daughter / son as private leader and organiser.
- (iv) I will notify Timothy Watson *before* the trip's departure of **any** ailment, allergy, condition or diet requiring the attention of the organiser.
- (v) I authorise Timothy Watson to act on my behalf in an emergency and to sign on my behalf any consent forms required by medical authorities if they know it would not be advisable to wait for my own signature.
- (vi) In the unlikely event of a gross breach of conduct or persistent non-cooperation on the part of my daughter / son I understand that (s)he will be sent home immediately and I agree to reimburse Timothy Watson for any extra expense resulting from such action.

Signed.....
(parent / guardian)

Date.....

Address.....
.....
.....

Tel. (home).....

Tel. (work).....

Email (if any).....

Pupil's passport details:

Date of birth..... Place of birth..... Passport no.

Place of issue..... Date of issue..... Date of expiry.....

Nationality.....

I enclose a cheque for £600 made payable to Timothy Watson and two additional cheques each for the sum of £500 post-dated for (i) 1 March and (ii) 1 June 2009

**Please return to:
Timothy Watson
The Manse, 45 West Street
Oundle PE8 4EJ**

The Walk to Rome

July 2009

detailed itinerary

day 1 fly early morning from London Gatwick to Bologna. Travel onwards by train to Siena where we stay in a simple but comfortable old hotel that has tantalising historical associations with dancing maidens, 100 yards from the miraculous Piazza del Campo. Early evening free to explore the city.

day 2 (approx. 3 1/2 hrs walking) free morning in Siena to enjoy its myriad wonders. At approx. 2pm we set out for the 15th C. Benedictine monastery of Abbazia di Monte Oliveto Maggiore, where we shall spend the night. Extraordinary in its dramatic situation, the monastery is renowned for its exquisite frescoes by Signorelli and Il Sodoma depicting the life of St Benedict, together with the superb marquetry in the choir by Fra Giovanni da Verona and Fra Raffaello da Brescia.

day 3 (approx. 8 hrs walking) we walk up from Monte Oliveto Maggiore along a high ridgeway, passing through the village of Chiusure and across the rolling valleys of the Val d'Orcia before making the final ascent to the town of Montalcino (1860ft) famed throughout the world for its stupendous red wine, Brunello. Here we install ourselves in rooms of great charm in a private house in the mediæval historic centre.

day 4 (approx. 7 hrs) the day begins with a short climb from Montalcino before descending all the way to the river from which the Val d'Orcia takes its name. On our way we pass the Norman-Romanesque church of Sant' Antimo, burial place of Charlemagne's heart, as local legend would have it. After lunch our paths climb and descend very abruptly as we follow the course of an old aqueduct running from Monte Amiata to Siena. We spend the night on a saddle of the foothills of Amiata in a comfortable hunters' lodge enjoying awe-inspiring views. Wild boar for dinner - yum yum.

day 5 *dies irae, dies illa!* (approx. 8 hrs) On leaving Poggio di Seggiano early in the morning we take a series of paths down and up over increasingly wild countryside, before passing through the village of Pescina. From here onwards the arduous way leads ever upward onto the mountain - Monte Amiata (5702ft) - until we reach dense forest, first chestnut, then cathedral-like beech (the highest in Europe), where no longer are there paths to guide us to the summit. Thereafter the compass is our saviour. After lunch on the summit and extraordinary views pace the weather, we descend, again by compass-work, the even more severe slopes of the SE flank of the extinct volcano. On reaching the mediæval abbey town of Abbadia San Salvatore, we stay in a former seminary of fading grandly decadent charms.

day 6 (approx. 9 hrs) after an early but gentle start to the morning we pass through the town of Piancastagnaio, the southernmost outpost of the Sienese Republic. Descending rapidly the last spur of Amiata, our way then undulates across more open countryside and the valleys of the rivers Paglia, Siele and Senna. Leaving Tuscany about midday and entering Lazio, we climb to a ridge leading to the ancient Etruscan hamlet of Proceno. From there we first descend and then climb up to Acquapendente, our goal for the night.

day 7 (approx. 6 hrs) following the rigours of the previous two days, a somewhat lighter prospect. We pass through the woods of the Monti Volsini, past Montalfina, before descending an Etruscan road into the vast crater of an extinct volcano, now filled with a freshwater lake of idyllic beauty. We enter the town of Bolsena through the bowels of its remarkable castle with evidence of its Etruscan, Roman and mediæval origins on either side of our path. We stay in a comfortable pensione close to the lake.

day 8 (approx. 7 hrs) after a short climb back up onto the rim of the volcano's crater our paths lead us to a wooded landscape crossed by the occasional torrent. After lunch and a short scramble out of a gorge we find ourselves walking on a long stretch of original Roman road, once part of the Via Cassia Antica, with superb views across Lake Bolsena and to the dome of the cathedral of Montefiascone, our destination. Here we spend two nights in a most comfortable pensione, a beautifully renovated 13th C. palazzo commanding fine views of the Monte Cimino, in the heart of the mediæval town just below the cathedral. Our sumptuous dinners, based upon the excellent local fish, coregone, have for their setting one of the more dazzling panoramas of northern Lazio and southern Tuscany.

day 9 free day in Montefiascone. Famous for its white wine of curious appellation - Est, Est, Est!!! - Montefiascone also boasts many architectural splendours, most notably its magnificent 16th C. cathedral dedicated to Santa Margherita (in which James Stuart married Mary of Modena) and the austere, solemnly beautiful 7th C. church of San Flaviano. The latter contains the tomb of Johannes Fugger, bishop of Augsburg

whose untimely death in 1116 here courtesy of Bacchus did wonders for the moscatello wine produced locally. The prospects from the belvedere, a short stroll up from the hotel, are little short of breathtaking on a clear day. A fine beach and excellent swimming in Lago di Bolsena are ten minutes' bus ride out of town.

day 10 (approx. 8 hrs) though the view from the belvedere of Montefiascone suggests a remarkably flat terrain across to Viterbo, the day's walk quickly proves otherwise. The gorges here are more numerous and deeper, the torrents wider, the descents thornier etc. etc. We pass the remains of a ruined Etruscan and Roman town, Ferentium, most of whose theatre still stands, empty and desolate, before continuing ever down and up, down and up through the series of gorges. After much toil and trouble we arrive first at the hamlet of Madonna della Quercia with its splendid early High Renaissance church, then at the one-time seat of the Papacy, Viterbo. We spend the night in a more modern hotel inside its ancient walls, but dine elsewhere on excellent Viterbese cucina del medioevo.

day 11 (approx. 9 hrs) the climbing continues. Leaving Viterbo by the Porta Romana we ascend steadily throughout the morning until we arrive at the saddle of the Monti Cimini, another series of volcanic mountains. Once over the lip of the next crater (2997ft) our path leads us down rapidly in the shadow of Monte Venere, at whose feet lies Lago di Vico. Surrounded by millions of groves of hazelnut trees, we skirt the edge of the lake to the point where bathing is possible and, by this stage in the day, wholly desirable. After swimming and a late lunch we continue through the crater to emerge at the top of a spur on which Ronciglione sits, perched high above a dramatic gorge. After pausing to enjoy the spectacular views of the gorge, Monte Soracte, and the Appenines beyond, we continue through the hazelnut groves lining our way out of Ronciglione, eventually emerging to find ourselves passing through the Roman gate of Sutri - 'Sutrium Hetruriae Claustra' - the gateway to Etruria - the land of the Etruscans. Outside its walls stands a monument to Roman efficiency and Etruscan slave labour, an amphitheatre hewn out of tufa rock and, nearby, a rock temple-church-mithraeum, La Madonna del Parto. Here the group will be accommodated variously within the one hotel in the historic centre and in a Carmelite convent. We dine just off the superb central piazza.

day 12 (approx. 6 hrs) After taking some time to view Sutri's extraordinary archaeological heritage, our pathways take us across open, gently rolling hillsides first to the curious village of Monterosi, then past Settevene, the last mediæval staging-post inn on the road to Rome, and eventually up to the bustling little town of Campagnano di Roma, the bell-foundry of Rome. We dine in buzzing and unusual surroundings.

day 13 (approx. 8 hrs) leaving Campagnano di Roma at dawn, we climb over the next ridge on paths leading us to the secluded crumbling hermit sanctuary of Madonna del Sorbo, before arriving for breakfast en route at the village of Formello. Despite our proximity to the Eternal City we continue through rich countryside, passing the buried ruins of the once majestic Etruscan city of Veii and down into a long gorge which eventually will bring us out at an ancient hamlet near La Storta. Dinner proves to be little short of gastronomic ecstasy, but requires a further mile's stroll in either direction.

day 14 (approx. 5 hrs) the day's walk begins at 5am. for the final march on Rome. Under cover of darkness we make our assault, first down the Via Cassia before turning down the Via Trionfale, stopping for a well-earned cappuccino or two at an excellent bar. Eventually emerging over the brow of Monte Mario we enjoy our first ecstatic view of the Eternal City - **Ecce Roma!** Having recovered our breath we proceed down the Trionfale into Rome and cross the Tiber to follow its banks to the Vatican. Once again we cross the river, this time over the Ponte San Angelo, the only complete surviving Roman bridge in the Eternal City, and turn our footsteps towards the majesty of St Peter's on whose steps the walk has its official end. Our hotel, high on the Aventine hill, lies between Circus Maximus and the ancient district built upon shards of Roman amphoraë, Testaccio. Meet for dinner at 8pm.

day 15 free day in Rome. Meet for dinner at 8pm.

day 16 free day in Rome. 9am optional tour of Rome's secret delights. Meet for dinner at 8pm.

day 17 free day in Rome. Meet for The Last Supper at 8pm.

day 18 free morning and early afternoon in Rome; we leave our hotel at approx. 4pm. to travel by public transport to Rome airport. Flight arrives late-evening at London Gatwick.

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The Walk to Rome – July 2006

Bella Sanders (formerly of Dryden's House, Westminster School) recounts her experience:

Still at school with exams imminent, Tuscany and Lazio seemed far, far away, in spite of Mr Hinze's impassioned e-mail pleas to wear in our boots. Frankly reality only bit, for me at least, much later. After clomping, fully-booted, through the Gatwick check-in system, after trying to put new names to friendly new Oundelian faces, even after being rudely woken up on the first morning by the din customarily caused when a Sienese *contrada* celebrates a victory in the city's annual season of horse races, the *Palio*. It was only standing at the very top of Siena's cathedral museum looking out across the stunningly well-preserved medieval city that I first truly comprehended the prospect of walking 180 miles in 12 days with a 15 litre rucksack.

The first few days seemed to confirm my fears, and prove that I evidently possessed no small enthusiasm for self-punishment. Searing limbs and blisters aplenty were predominant themes, narrowing my outlook to mere survival.

However, I must not give the wrong impression, nor do a disservice to this incredible trip.

Watson's Walk to Rome is no boot camp. Instead I'd call it a cross between a pilgrimage and a 21st century Grand Tour.

The penitence, as it were, came first. Hardship, however, is a great talking-point, and the Westminsters and Oundelians were soon getting on as well as if we had not only just met a few days earlier. We found ourselves breathing new life into that old concept of camaraderie, whether involving sharing i-pods or donating *Compeed*.

What's more, Dr. Watson, master of timing and genius walking psychologist, knew our limits and how to reward us: gourmand five course evening feasts accompanied by countless carafes of local wine, plus a day off after the first week by the shores of Lake Bolsena, not to mention an encounter with Dr. Katz en route. His attitude is that the key to achieving feats of physical endurance lies 'all in the mind'. I'm inclined to agree. After all, who could have said they would be able to walk for nearly 12 hours straight? Which Westminster urbanite could have declared themselves fit to climb Monte Amiata, a mountain a third higher than Ben Nevis, before lunch (well, rather a late lunch at 5 o'clock)? Certainly not I.

By the time we reached Rome many were convinced that Watson was indeed a God of sorts; he navigated without a map at all times, walked without eating, and silenced viciously yapping guard dogs with a mere glare. Italians threw open their hotels and restaurants (which you could never find in a guide book) for our exclusive use. He knows the brutal gradients of Tuscany, and the ancient paths and Arcadian gorges of Lazio better than the locals, and has shared his love for this region with unsuspecting walkers for twenty-odd years.

A large part of this trip's pleasure lies in its many antique delights, which crop up in the impossibly beautiful countryside of Central Italy long before Rome. The monastery church of Sant' Antimo, alleged resting-place of Charlemagne's heart, and the basilica at Montefiascone where James II scuppered his chances for the succession by marrying the Catholic Mary of Modena are to name but two.

But of course Rome was the ultimate prize, and a powerful incentive from the very first day. Ironically our new fitness sent us out exploring the sights by day (and by night) with extra stamina. The Seven Hills of Rome – what hills?! Standing in St. Peter's it was hard not to feel smugly superior to the victims of coach tours all around, having walked, talked and sweated our way to 25 000 years off purgatory!

The Walk to Rome is entirely without peer in the way it leads its participants into an eccentric but irresistible parallel universe. O lucky ones who have already signed up, you will come back recounting tales of blister heroism and sun-soaked rustic beauty, perhaps even in rhyming couplets, naturally impervious to the fact that non-walkers haven't the foggiest what you're on about (and think you're barmy). Of course they haven't, the poor things.