



# The Hillingdon Trail

A short story by Brandon Butterfield

Whilst sitting at home one day, eating junk food and watching the television, the sound of a letter sliding through the letterbox caused me to spring to my feet. Who could be sending little old me a letter I wondered. I brushed the crumbs from my t-shirt and walked to the door to peruse over this exciting prospect. Low and behold it was a copy of the local publication, The Hillingdon People, curled into a cone and waiting for me to unravel it. I reached for the purpley-grey covered copy and began flipping through the pages. I always enjoy a bit of insight into the local happenings and hoo-has in Hillingdon, so I decided to close the booklet for the time being and save the juicy contents for later, when I could browse through the articles properly with a cup of coffee in the garden.

When the sun was high in the sky, I popped the kettle on and made my caffeinated drink. No milk, no sugar. I brought my mug outside with The Hillingdon People rolled in my other hand, ready to uncover the latest local news while I soaked up some sun. I pulled up a wooden chair to my garden table, took a sip of my eye widening beverage, and began thumbing through the contents of the glossy publication. There were pieces about recent outdoor improvements that had been made in parks and on the Polish War Memorial, an article detailing the ongoing support the council is providing to elderly residents during the pandemic, and several other interesting tidbits to give food for thought. Somewhere in the middle, a particular appeal drew my attention. 'Hillingdon Stories', written in bold capitals jumped off the page at me, instantly catching my eye. I found myself scanning the two columns twice over, making sure I read every word correctly. The appeal was asking residents of the borough to send their stories in a range of formats to portray their experiences throughout lock-down. This was perfect! As an aspiring writer I couldn't wait to send my story to the local press. All I needed was a story.

That evening, around 6 or 7pm, right as the sun was emitting an orangey hue as it does during the golden hour, my girlfriend and I set out on one of our leisurely strolls on the footpaths near our house. Where we live, we are fortunate enough to be within a short five minute walk from a section of the Hillingdon Trail which passes through Ickenham Marsh. The walk that evening was especially beautiful, as the broken light shed through the trees on the edge of the path, and glowed vibrantly over the meadows behind them. We chatted and laughed as we meandered along the winding path, just as we had many times during the lock-down period. That's when it came to me. This is what I would write about! Occasionally while we had been wandering the same route during lock-down, my girlfriend and I had discussed the idea of walking the whole of the Hillingdon Trail one day in the future. In its entirety, from start to finish, on one ambitious trek in a single day. I knew from the information boards we had crossed along the short distances we had covered on the trail that the whole thing was approximately 20 miles long. That's only six shy of a marathon. I had my concept, all I had to do was tackle the challenge. I asked my girlfriend if she'd like to join me, but her other commitments meant I'd have to pursue this goal independently. I promised myself then and there that two days later I would lace up my shoes and head out on my local adventure.

On the morning of Monday 14 September, two days after the idea blossomed, I woke up well rested and refreshed from a decent night's sleep. I stretched my arms, yawned ungracefully and began my preparations for the day ahead, starting with a hearty breakfast of toast and peanut butter, an apple, and a large cup of coffee. I decided to travel light for my excursion, not keen to be hauling a heavy backpack with me on a day that promised to reach 30°C. I figured I'd walk at a pace of approximately 3 mph, meaning the whole length of the trail from end to end would take just under seven hours to complete, and that wasn't considering rest stops and a lunch break... or the fact I'd probably get lost a few times and have to double back on myself. There was nothing I desired less than to be carrying extra weight along with me for the duration of the trip, so when I packed my backpack I kept it to the bare minimum. My lunch would be comprised

of two cheese and onion sandwiches, some rice cakes and an apple. To drink, I brought a water bottle and a bottle of ginger ale. The other bits and bobs I packed consisted of a battery pack for charging my phone, the charging cable, a set of headphones, my wallet and my keys. Oh, and a face mask, which I try to remember wherever I go these days just in case I need to pop into a shop. After making my final check and zipping up my backpack, I got changed into some comfy walking shorts and slid on my running shoes. (If they're good for running, they're good for walking, right?)

The brief 20 minute drive from my house to the head of the trail in Cranford Country Park created an illusion that the trail was shorter than it actually is. As my girlfriend drove me to my starting point, the thought that I would be home before I initially predicted crossed my mind, but having hiked many times before I was careful not to be deceived by the perception of distance while driving on a direct route on road as opposed to navigating a twisting path through fields and forests. We arrived at Cranford Country Park at 10.10am, where my girlfriend kindly reminded me to be careful and to call her when I approached my final destination somewhere in Harefield later on. She waved me off and wished me well. What lay ahead was the Hillingdon Trail.

Another large part of my preparation before taking my first steps on this journey, was the research I did the night before. I had the fear that I would get totally disoriented and find myself miles off course, so I needed a trustworthy solution to correct any errors I was liable to make. Previously, when I had loosely followed the trail on casual strolls with my girlfriend, we had sought direction from the frequently and conveniently placed sign posts that pointed us the right way. They come in three different styles; a tall metal post which boasts brown flag shaped signage stating 'Hillingdon Trail', small cuboidal wooden posts which have the letters 'HT' and sometimes white arrows engraved into them, and least commonly, yellow signs with the trail name written and a boot print pictured on circles the size of large badges. The last are usually attached to a wooden post standing six feet tall, and indicate which direction you need to turn when at a cross section. Once or twice along the route I also came across tall wooden posts with wooden flag shaped signage which looked like an older version of the first style. They were rare, but they added a sense of antiquity to the pathway. Although these posts and pillars are useful, they are only fairly reliable. To avoid wandering off the path and never finding it again I decided to use an online OS map to help guide me, which had the added feature of tracking my live location. I didn't want to be dependent on the map, and only intended to use it if I were feeling lost, so with it open on my phone in my pocket, I took a deep breath and set one foot in front of the other.

The temperature was moderate when I began my ambitious escapade, and the morning dew still lay freshly on the grass in the park. As I tread down the first section of the trail my shoes became moist, but not wet enough to soak my socks, and the dampness I accrued would soon dry in the heat of the day. The surroundings were peacefully calm. Other than the chirping birds and people walking their dogs, I had the path to myself. I wandered in a northerly direction, stopping only to take a few pictures. One of which was of a numbered sign-board which gave a brief summary of the trail, including relevant information on the local wildlife, ecosystem and historic landmarks situated in the primary section. Sign-board 1 encouraged me to look out for herons along the Union Canal, and St. Dunstan's Church, where the oldest parts of the structure date back to the 15th century. I took a quick snap of the board and decided that throughout my travels I would attempt to stay on course enough to at least take photographs of the other five similar boards.

It didn't take long before I had to turn to the OS map, and honestly, I was excited to see how well the tracking feature functioned. I unlocked my phone and there on the screen shining brightly back at me was the view of the park I had zoomed in on, a red line

signifying the route of the path, and a little blue dot which showed my location. So far so good. I was on track and would be joining the Union Canal in no time. From there I could pop my headphones in and begin listening to my audio book as there was no risk of taking a wrong turn. I would later learn that the main risk whilst having your headphones in is being hit by a cyclist. Luckily for me, the one that rode up patiently behind me ringing the tiny silver bell attached to her handlebars slowed enough so that the faintest tinny tinkling sound could be heard over the volume of my headphones, at which point I was startled out of Michelle Obama's engrossing childhood recollections and back into reality, where I moved aside politely, then chose to stick predominantly to the right side of the path where I was out of harm's way.

Along the canal, as the sign-board had accurately stated, I spotted several water bound birds, from swans to herons. A family of geese pedalled their webbed feet underwater and swam right up to me by the side of the path. I wouldn't necessarily want to swim in the canal, but the view from beside it was charming, and I enjoyed watching the birds dip their heads under the surface, craning their elongated necks to stretch for food beneath them. A fence to the right of the path cast a shadow across it which looked identical to a train track. The resemblance was uncanny. I continued along like a locomotive, full steam ahead. Next stop, Yeading Valley.

Even after only covering such a short distance on the trail I had noticed the wide range of group dynamics, races and nationalities that our community contains becoming evident. I walked past couples, young families, elderly people, joggers - anyone who passed me I would flash a smile, and to my delight most people smiled back. Those that didn't, waved. There wasn't a single person or group of people who I didn't interact with, and although the first part of the path was reasonably unpopulated that day, I was surprised at how friendly everyone was. I smelled food from different cultures wafting over garden fences. Expertly spiced curries and the unmistakable scent of grilled meats sizzling on the barbecue tickled my nostrils around lunch time. I was proud to be walking through the heart of our borough's local communities and witnessing first hand how seemingly happy they were. Home to an amalgamation of races and religions, Hillingdon oozes palpable open mindedness, and not just a willingness to embrace different cultures, but a welcoming enthusiasm to. This was a recurring thought that ran through my mind, through all sections of the trail.

As the time approached midday, I was making steady progress toward a familiar part of the footpath that my girlfriend and I had walked several times during lock-down. The day was heating up, but a gentle breeze and drink stops in shaded spots were enough to keep me cool. I had wavered slightly from the trail once or twice through section 1, so had to revert back to the online map on a couple of occasions just to get myself back on course. I made a critical realisation at one point that changed the rest of the day for the better. I realised that the red line across the map was drawn by whoever had walked the path in the past, and who had created the useful OS map version for future users. The line itself wasn't actually possible to follow exactly, a fact that had led me astray beforehand. I was trying to stick to the red route precisely, until it took me into a small park which I circled around aimlessly looking for the trail. It was nowhere in sight, and it was only when I zoomed in closer to the map that I discovered the trail was quite clearly marked out on the screen as well. It had taken me two hours figure this out, but when I finally clocked that the red line was just a guideline, and that I could actually see the trail with all its twist and turns included when I zoomed in a bit more, I was able to foresee the upcoming direction and prevent any further delays due to misreading the map. When I made the realisation, I briskly left the park I had been circling around like a headless chicken. Subtle bemused glances from a woman sat on a bench reading a book added to the relief when I found a metal post with a brown flag shaped sign showing me the way forward. Whoops!

Sign-board 2 emerged from behind some foliage as I entered the second section of the trail shortly after. It was a section that I had walked before, and I was glad to be on familiar ground where I could depend on my knowledge of the route instead of the OS map. I am particularly fond of this part of the path as it is draped like a strand of string, slithering through two woods. Ten Acre Wood is the first, followed closely by Gutteridge Wood, which is hundreds of years old. Gutteridge is especially beautiful in spring as the woodland floor is adorned with blossoming bluebells, announcing the new season. With my headphones now playing Nas' newly released album - King's Disease, which I had been waiting for the right opportunity to listen to, I was accompanied by the beat of the music, as it propelled me through sun soaked fields and into the cover of the trees.

An overhead canopy of branches and leaves provided the ideal shelter from the increasing power of the sun in the early afternoon. I made sure to refresh regularly with sips of water and fizzy ginger ale, but on that uncharacteristically hot September's day, I was in need of some respite from the rising temperature. Meandering through the second section, allowing my subconscious memory to take over the lead of my feet, I slowed to a more leisurely pace to conserve my energy. By doing this, and by not having to concentrate fully on the direction I was heading, my senses were heightened and I began appreciating the path for its stunning natural surroundings. I passed under apple trees and trod on the fallen fruit beneath me, releasing sweet scents that enlivened me. When I removed my headphones for a moment, the music continued in the form of a symphony performed by the wildlife. Squirrels rummaged amongst the twigs and dried leaves for acorns, birds sang in harmony, calling out to each other, and a light breeze whistled through the trunks of the towering trees around me. It was a blissful environment, my favourite so far on the path that day. Little did I know just how enchanting the trail became further along.

As I trampled over muddy paths, which became concrete, then gravel coated, I noticed a plant that I seemed to be crossing all too often. Blackberry bushes, thorny and scraggly, jutted out into the path, scratching at my arms and legs when I hadn't noticed them. I wasn't inexperienced with this painfully irritating sensation, as when I bought my house in 2018, the garden was overrun by the invasive plant. I wondered to myself if there was something in the soil that made them spread so speedily, if they thrived on the nutrients Hillingdon's infamous clay foundations contain. Whatever it is, if you walk the trail, just bear in mind that these plants don't want to be your friends, and although they produce a succulent berry you may be tempted to pick, the sharpness of their thorns can pierce your skin vexatiously, which is enough to deter anybody. Saying that, they are remarkable in their own way, and the manner in which this bush persistently returns is audacious. Believe me, I'm constantly digging up their roots which mimic the London Underground map beneath my lawn. While I traipsed through the northern end of Gutteridge Wood, toward Ickenham Marsh, I kept a vigilant eye on the path ahead for any overhanging spiky branches... and on the floor for stinging nettles, which also caught me unaware sometimes then had a giggle with their bramble compatriots.

When I exited the woods, thoroughly scathed and stung, I passed through a small park in east Uxbridge called Elephant Park. Within the grassy field that makes up the majority of the park, there is a small play area with swings and things for children, which is also home to equipment for exercise enthusiasts. The yellow machines, which create resistance through the users body weight, were marked as off limits during lock-down, but have since been made accessible after restrictions were eased. I was impressed to see a family of three generations, from grandchild to grandparent, and parent/daughter in between, all having a go on the machines together as I walked past on my trek. The child was laughing as she circled around on the pedal while her grandfather operated the elliptical trainer. His grin was as wide as hers. I'm aware of two other locations in the borough where these outdoor gym facilities can be found; one in Swakeleys Park (which is on another footpath

called the Celandine Route), and the other is by the lido, which I would pass later on. When I passed the energetic family in Elephant Park, I remembered when the facilities had been closed, and how that impacted so many of us who could no longer go to gyms. In the height of lock-down when we were only permitted one outdoor form of exercise a day, these gyms were sorely missed. Now that they're re-opened, I watched just how active and joyful they make the local residents. And not just gym-goers either. I've seen a huge range of people using the equipment, including elderly couples, people with injuries doing personal physical therapy, and groups of teens too young to join gyms getting an early start on their fitness. They are a practical, innovative and appreciated addition to the parks they are situated in, which are already great spaces for getting some fresh air and invigorating exercise.

Ickenham Marsh, proudly identified by the third sign-board, is my local section of the path and it is approximately halfway along the Hillingdon Trail. To mark the feat of having reached the halfway point near my home, I took a seat on a tree stump and decided to take my lunch break. Under the shelter of the trees, I unzipped my backpack and felt around for my cheese and onion sandwiches. Squashed doesn't begin to do justice to the state they were in. Floppy and sad, as I unwrapped the cling film around the first one, it drooped out like one of the clocks in Salvador Dali's *The Persistence Of Memory*. The appetite of my growling stomach conquered the lack of appeal, and despite the appearance of the misshapen meal, the sandwiches tasted delicious. I washed back the breaded bites with a few gulps of water, then ate the apple and two rice cakes. I made a quick call to catch up with a friend while my lunch digested, and at the end of the call, gathered my things to restart my momentum.

Steady progress was being made on my local stretch of the trail. I had no distractions in terms of direction and I was able to stride forward with confidence. That was until I came to an intersection where the trail cuts into Ruislip Golf Course in the heart of West Ruislip. Unfortunately, for a reason unbeknownst to me, there were red, waist high signs with the dooming words 'Footpath Closed' written across them. I was slightly taken aback, and admittedly disappointed, but if this had to be the case on any part of the journey I was glad that it was at that intersection. I wasn't overjoyed to have to change course involuntarily, but there really was a silver lining. That being that I was aware of another nearby route that would follow almost the same course as the Hillingdon Trail and lead me up toward the lido, without losing time or adding distance. This was another route I had become fond of during lock-down, and one that I have mentioned earlier about a short span that runs through Swakeleys Park.

The Celandine Route, from where I was about to join it, follows the River Pinn along the back end of the golf course and passes through residential roads, before landing you a short length from a detour you can take up to the lido. With equally rewarding scenery as the Hillingdon Trail - and set in as tranquil surroundings, this mostly flat route is just another inspiration to lace up your walking shoes and go outdoors. At this point I would like to make a logical suggestion that you should choose the right footwear if you will be walking long distance. Neither of the two trails I have mentioned are overly challenging (I've refrained from using the word 'hike' for either as they hardly fluctuate in elevation), however they mustn't be underestimated. I learnt this lesson the hard way, and nearly four hours into my march across the borough, my heels began to blister painfully. I slogged on, knowing the soreness would calm down, but there was an unpleasant period before I reached the lido where my feet were screaming 'you shouldn't have worn running shoes!' You live, you learn... you wince in pain a little along the way.

From reading previous articles by others who have traipsed the Hillingdon Trail before me, I formed an impression of the general opinion of the route's highlights. I can't say that I

could disagree, and will now add to the pages of praise that will tell you the jewel in the crown has to be the serene sight of the glorious Ruislip Lido. Opened in 1811 as a reservoir supporting the Grand Canal, the body of water wasn't always what it is today. It wasn't until 1933 when it was reopened as a lido that people have been attracted to the hot spot that Hillingdon is proud to be home of. On a typical summer's day the waterfront pub will be bustling, couples can be seen taking romantic strolls around the perimeter, and children can be heard laughing as they ride the mini railway that chugs through the area. When I moseyed up to the lido on my trek, it had an unusual sense of abandonment due to the gates that surrounded it, which were in place to prevent people from gathering, in the council's ongoing attempts to control the spread of the virus. Nonetheless, the beaming sun rays shimmered off the water, glistening in the ripples as a light breeze blew over the surface. Complemented by shades of green from the bordering trees, the blue sky and sandy golden beach effortlessly stood out with distinction. I had no choice but to take a rest stop, sacrificing my momentum for the peaceful view of the unique environment I looked out on. I gazed over the water and chilled in the warmth of the afternoon, absorbing the mellow atmosphere. Half an hour passed before the thought of leaving even crossed my mind, but when it eventually dawned on me that I had to get my groove on in order to finish before sunset, I took a mouthful of water to see me on my way. Plenty of daylight remained, the time was only approaching 3pm, but somewhere at the back of my mind was the niggling fact that I had never walked any of the later stages of the route, which inevitably meant I would have to account for getting lost. In turn, that could mean losing time, and ultimately the daylight. There was no way I wanted to be stuck in the upcoming section after dark without a clue where I was, so I made haste, leaving the lovely lido behind and heading for the luxuriant Ruislip Woods.

For me, the woods were a close contender for the most peaceful and pleasing section of the trail, and I could understand completely if others were to say it was the highlight. I say 'it', but in fact, as sign-board 4 informed me, Ruislip Woods is a collective of ancient woodland; Park Wood, Copse Wood, Bayhurst Wood, and the curiously named Mad Bess' Wood. There is no conclusive reason for the title Mad Bess' Wood, but as you might guess people's imaginations have conjured up ghostly tales of a headless horsewoman who rides along the bridleways alone at night. I wasn't willing to risk witnessing this theory prove itself, so I must reiterate, I did not want to be stuck in this section after dark. During the day, when I found myself treading through the isolated groves, there was no sign of such apparition, and the silence that could otherwise be interpreted as eerie, was merely a blank canvas for the crunching sound of gravel and leaves which crumpled beneath me. I thoroughly savoured walking in the woods, as it reminded me of one of my favourite author's most entertaining books. *A Walk In The Woods* by Bill Bryson, sees him document his exploration of the Appalachian Trail which is approximately 2,200 miles long, over 100 times the distance I was covering! As with many of his titles, the travel log is full of humour and wit from cover to cover, and I recalled some of the sticky situations he recorded as I paved the way on my own adventure. They helped me endeavour across the terrain which had become unquestionably more demanding. Suddenly there were dips and climbs that I hadn't faced in the earlier stages of the trail, but they were manageable, even as my energy levels began to wane. After five hours of being on my feet my drive was flailing, zapped by the sun and worn shoes, and as I approached the final forest of the four, Bayhurst Wood, I decided to take a glance at the map to get an idea of how far I still had to go. The map indicated 'not too far, but be conservative', so I planned a cheeky shortcut around Bayhurst Wood by opting to take the David Brough cycle trail, which would save me 20 minutes or so. I made a mental note to return to the wood in Harefield someday with my girlfriend, as it was alluring, and no doubt vividly verdant, but for the time being I made the wise choice to save something in the tank for the last push along the trail.

Beyond Bayhurst, hedge hidden fields sloped over small hills offered scoping views over the forests yonder. On the peak of one hill, in the middle of a squared off meadow, a sole oak tree grew healthily, providing a fairy tale like setting for an afternoon picnic. Without a soul in sight, the remote location had privacy and escapism written all over it. I could have been passing through the Yorkshire Dales for all I knew, until Savay Lake and the river Colne appeared in the distance over the hump of the mound. Just further along, on the descent from the elevated viewpoint, I came to the oldest site in Harefield, heaped in heritage, St. Mary's church. This elegant medieval building took my breath away in an instant. Surrounded by the Australian Military Cemetery, which has over 100 gravestones in commemoration of the soldiers who died at Harefield Park Hospital during WW1, the church emanated a holy glow in the late afternoon's light. An annual Anzac ceremony takes place in the church grounds in memory of those who sacrificed their lives, an occasion that bonds the community in appreciation and respect. I was in sheer awe at the admirable location, and it certainly commanded my appreciation and respect intrinsically. St. Mary's left a lasting impression on me, and as I continued forth onto the last leg of my 20 mile venture, I allowed a humbling feeling to settle in and give me perspective. I found strength in the thought of those soldiers' resilience, in the unification of the local community, and used those thoughts as my motivation to pursue my goal. I wanted to finish with my head held high, as a way of showing my respect to those that lay at the foot of St. Mary's.

I was nearing the end of my pursuit, and as I rejoined the Grand Union Canal I was going steadfast and feeling rejuvenated. Sign-board 5 denoted Harefield Locks, and as I passed Jack's Mill I felt the pick me up that a buzzing populated area can sometimes induce. The past two hours of walking had been in relative solitude, without much human presence or interaction. I had had a brief conversation with a lady in the woods (who wasn't riding a horse and had a head thankfully), and a glitchy video chat with my mother via Whatsapp, but other than that I was on my own. I was grateful to see an abundance of people again, fishing in the canal and enjoying cold beverages in the beer gardens as I ambled by. I was tempted myself to take a pew whilst nursing some honey coloured liquid refreshment, and the cruel temptress in the form of The Coy Carp wasn't easy to resist, but I battled the beckoning temptation successfully, promising myself I'd have one when I got home later, to compensate. After all, it wouldn't be long until I could put my weary feet up and relax.

The final section of the trail swooped through Park Wood on the west side of Harefield. There was a minor hill, with a medium gradient probably not worth mentioning, other than the fact that it felt like Mount Everest for me at the time. The Kings Of Leon blared in my headphones, and I used up every last bit of energy I had, digging deep to reach the finishing point. The OS map confirmed the close proximity of it, so I trudged my way toward it song by song. When I came within 15 minutes of the end, I made a call I had been looking forward to for the past few hours. I made the evacuation call to my girlfriend, short and sweet, then sent her a link to my location so she could come pick me up and take me home. I traipsed through the last few fields with the heightening sense of achievement bubbling inside me, until finally I came to Springwell Lane, where the tail end of the Hillingdon Trail lies like a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. With sore feet and a sweaty t-shirt I searched for the final sign-board to officially mark the end of my arduous journey.

Frustratingly, I couldn't find it before my girlfriend picked me up, which was a disheartening stain on my epic experience. Minutely deflated, I hopped in the car and we began to drive home after being unable to pin-point the last board using the OS map. Ironically, within 20 seconds of driving, we rounded a bend and the final sign-board appeared. My face lit up and I urged my girlfriend to stop the car so I could take a picture. Sign-board B (I have no idea why it isn't number 6, but at that point it didn't matter to

me), listed all the other sign-boards along the route; Cranford Park, Yeading Valley, Ickenham Marsh, Ruislip Woods and Harefield Locks. I had crossed them all, taken pictures of each, and felt like I had earned the right to say I had walked the whole of the Hillingdon Trail in a single day. Despite the shortcut past Bayhurst Wood and the regrettable 20 second drive to the finish line, I'm still claiming it as a victory. Especially as my Endomondo app tracked me as having walked almost 23 miles! In total, I burnt a whopping 2000 calories on the way. I looked at the time to see how long it had taken, and to my delight it had taken just over seven hours from end to end.

I finished at 5.20pm, and when that takes into account the breaks and times I got lost, I was genuinely surprised I'd be home before dinner time. My knees were aching and I probably smelled like a washing basket full of old socks, but I had done it.

### **Afterthoughts**

Although I may have gone astray in some places along the trail, I benefited from walking through the entire borough by foot because I discovered the true depth that Hillingdon possesses, which I had previously been unaware of. This experience has encouraged me to delve further into the history of our great borough, to learn more of its rich heritage, and to contribute where I can to the community, starting with this story. It brought to my attention that Hillingdon offers a wealth of outdoor activities, and for one as popular as walking, there is a wide variety of gratifying footpaths accommodating miles upon miles of scenic routes to roam.

On my walk, I was baffled at how deserted the trail was. At times I enjoyed the peace and quiet, at times I valued the presence of others, but other than near the lido which was by far the busiest section, the trail was uncommonly devoid of people for a hot autumn's day. Perhaps this could be explained by the pandemic, or by the fact it was a Monday and people were working, or maybe I was the only person who opted to walk certain parts of the Hillingdon Trail that day. What I am trying to say I guess, is that we are privileged to live in a borough where we are never more than half an hour's drive from the centre of the capital with its easily accessible social aspects, yet we can escape to these rural, picturesque destinations which lay on our doorstep in no time at all. All these things combined helped evolve my impression of Hillingdon throughout the day. From the sense of well-being in the beautiful open spaces, to the unconditional friendliness of the locals. From marvelling at the medieval architecture, to learning about the intriguing stories behind them. If you ever need a reason to be grateful for where we reside, I can recommend following this route from the bottom of my heart.

Drawing to a conclusion, based on my experience, I would have to say the second half of the trail was dotted with more attractive features than the first. So, if you don't fancy walking the whole thing and would rather just take a leisurely stroll, start near the lido and work your way toward Harefield would be my advice. I only say this because of the undeniable serenity of the lido, my personal fondness for walking through the woods, and St. Mary's Church, which stopped me in my tracks with its astounding beauty. They were all highlights for me, and therefore would prioritise them if I had limited time. That's not to say the first half doesn't have its highlights, namely the riverside section on the Grand Union Canal, and Gutteridge Wood. Both halves offer different environments, views and landscapes, so ultimately, the choice is a personal one. They also vary in difficulty, which may affect your decision, the second half being more strenuous and physically demanding. Bear in mind I may be biased because I was shattered by the end, so each ask of me drained what little energy I had left, and I struggled to maintain a brisk pace with equal levels of vigour and endurance toward the later stages. The terrain became rougher and inclines more common, but sun spotted forests and broad vistas spurred me on. I found

that each section had its own uniqueness, with the path winding through parks, along the canal, across meadows, by the lido, in the woods, up hills and down residential roads. No two sections were the same, although they seemed to meld into each other seamlessly, and I found that the further I travelled, the more fun and exceptional the path gradually became. It was an unforgettable day out, blessed with ideal conditions and multiple impressive environments.

I gained a huge sense of achievement by walking the trails that day, but more importantly I gained a real sense of pride for the place we call home. A culturally diverse London borough steeped with charismatic charm, astonishing natural beauty, and a deep rooted history. I found it all on the Hillingdon Trail.

**Brandon Butterfield, 2020**