Many Interfaces readers will already know that I am walking round Wales next year. This will be a one-thousand-mile journey, which takes in most of the major towns and cities of Wales as well as many miles of remote and rural coastline.

Earlier this year the Welsh Government announced the opening of the Wales Coastal Path, a new long distance footpath around the whole coast of Wales. There were several existing long distance paths covering parts of the coastline, as well as numerous stretches of public footpaths at or near the coast. However, these have now been linked, mapped and waymarked creating, for the first time, a continuous single route. In addition, the existing Offa’s Dyke long distance path cuts very closely along the Welsh–English border, so that it is possible to make a complete circuit of Wales on the two paths combined.

As soon as I heard the announcement, I knew it was something I had to do, and gradually, as I have discussed it with more and more people, the idea has become solid. This will not be the first complete...
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more recently coloured by Semantic
integration and aggregation (mashups!),
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island, around the coast of Wales, or in
Seventeen years on, these issues are
of intermittent connectivity and delays.
Some of this IT focus will build on my own
Data and disconnection
Some of this IT focus will build on my own
research. For example, back in 1995, I
wrote one of the earliest journal papers
on the human interface issues of mobile
technology, focused particularly on issues
of intermittent connectivity and delays.
Seventeen years on, these issues are
still very pertinent whether on a Scottish
island, around the coast of Wales, or in
rural areas of developing countries. I
have also long had an interest in data
integration and aggregation (mashups!),
more recently coloured by Semantic
Web connections.
Both of these are critical in the work I’m
involved with, developing a mobile heritage
app on Tiree; and both are equally relevant
in remote West Wales. It is interesting to
recall that back in 1992 Russell Beale and
I submitted a grant proposal around the
use of synchronisation technology to deal
with limited connectivity. The reviewers
unanimously said that it would be
irrelevant in a few years given increases in
connectivity and bandwidth … 20 years on
we are still waiting!
Maps on the way
Another aspect will be the use of local
maps, connecting with another long-term
interest in the nature of maps, mapping
and human understanding of space.
Communities often have their own maps
in locally or individually produced tourist
guides. Sometimes these are traced
initially from ‘standard’ maps, but they
may also use non-standard and non-
uniform projections. For example, town
plans are often hillside rather than birds-
eye views and a recent map of Cardigan
has been knitted into a giant cardigan.
However, Google maps and similar online
services, while revolutionising day-to-day
mapping, use ‘standard’ maps, losing the
sense of local identity and ownership.
I hope to challenge this Cartesian
hegemony, seeking to empower locality
through cartography.
Open to community
Most important, though, will be listening
for the needs and problems of the local
communities through which I pass. Many
will be rural and remote, maybe with
similar issues to Tiree. However, the
cost path will also cut through the edges
of industrial and urban areas: Milford
Haven, Port Talbot, Swansea, Newport and
Cardiff itself. Historically the docklands
have been the deprived poorer areas of
towns, and while substantial parts have
been ‘gentrified’, still I expect to encounter
economic marginality in the urban as well
as rural areas.
Living lab
As I walk I’m also offering myself as a
‘living lab’ to other research groups. This
maybe to trial ubicomp technology, mobile
applications, body sensors, or to aid in
ethnographic data gathering.
The three months of the project allow
time for me to use some prototype
technology or technique for a short period,
and then for it to be modified and tried
again later in the walk. There will be one
rule, ‘no blood’: at the first hint of sensor
sores they go in the bin!
A personal journey
I am Welsh, born and brought up in Cardiff,
so there is clearly a personal dimension
and I will be blogging and writing more
reflectively and philosophically as I go.
Furthermore it will be a physical challenge
as I haven’t walked any distance for 30
years. However, this is not divorced from
the academic and technological side of the
journey and I will be drawing on my own
past writings, as well as those of others
such as Rebecca Solnit’s Wanderlust and
Phoebe Sengers’ What I learned on
Change Islands.
... And you
This is a personal journey, but also a
community journey, and not least the HCI
community. I won’t be able to do it without
the help of others, but likewise I hope to be
able to help fellow researchers as well as
the communities through which I pass.
Put on your boots and join me for part
of the walk. Be a remote partner offering
advice, solutions, coding for issues that
arise along the way. Use me to trial and
experiment with your applications and
technology or as a source of field data.
Help me with logistics ... I am not the
world’s most organised person. Also, I
am seeking funding to cover some of
the costs, so if you know any suitable
sources (I’m happy to wear sponsorship
logos on my T-shirts!), or if my walk could
contribute to existing projects that could
supplement travel and subsistence for
some of the journey, do let me know.
... And you
This is a personal journey, but also a
community journey, and not least the HCI
community. I won’t be able to do it without
the help of others, but likewise I hope to be
able to help fellow researchers as well as
the communities through which I pass.
Finally
Follow my progress as I plan the journey
on twitter at @AlanWalksWales or at the
walk web site: www.alandix.com/alanwalkswales.