



**Alan Dix, Talis and University of Birmingham, plans an exploration of IT at the periphery for tourists and communities as he circumnavigates the country of his birth.**

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





periplus along these paths; this summer there have been at least two sponsored walkers taking on the route. However, I will be doing the walk with a technology focus, which will, I believe, be unique.

As I go I will be focusing on the IT needs of walkers and local communities, aiming to create both practical interventions and also future research opportunities.

#### **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 Tíree; 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 Tíree. However, the coast 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.

However, while contributions to expenses will be welcome, the offer to be a 'living lab' does not in any way depend on this.

#### **Finally**

Follow my progress as I plan the journey on twitter at [@AlanWalksWales](https://twitter.com/AlanWalksWales) or at the walk web site:

[www.alandix.com/alanwalkswales](http://www.alandix.com/alanwalkswales).