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Forget satnav – give me good old-fashioned map any time

I've loved road maps for as long as I can remember – I adore OS maps even more. Why would anyone want to take a screen on a country walk?

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The joy of maps: I adore the way they concertina out and reveal the secrets of landscape we take for granted.

Photograph: Loop Images/Alamy

I killed a fox, and I feel terrible about it. For those who haven't read [this column](#) before and might assume it's a different kind of countryside column, I perhaps should rephrase that: my car hit a fox when I was driving through Suffolk on the dual carriageway last month. It was late at night, and the fox sprang out of nowhere, kamikaze fashion. In view of the speed I was travelling at, it probably didn't have much chance to realise it had been hit, but over the next few days that didn't seem like much consolation to me, and probably wouldn't be to the fox, wherever it is now in the vulpine afterlife.

The Good, The Bad and The Furry: Life with the World's

Prior to this, I'd always had reasonably good relations with foxes. I spend a large amount of every autumn and winter listening to

Most Melancholy Cat and Other Whiskery Friends

by Tom Cox



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songs about them, sung during the early 70s by people with beards (the novelist [Ben Myers](#) once suggested to me that, such is the foxiness of autumn in the British countryside, October should be renamed "Foxtober"). [My cat Janet used to invite a very frail one into my garden](#) and sit with it on the lawn in companionable silence. When [BBC's Winterwatch](#) team tried to track a fox in Sussex via GPS and it vanished, I worried about it for weeks afterwards.

Now, though, I'd become another in a long line of rural Brits who had done foxes a disservice. "What does the fox say?" the irritating and [yet strangely compelling hit song The Fox](#) asked from the speakers in my local BP station the next day.

"Eeeeeeyyaheeeee," answered one of the foxes that live on the tract of rough ground just outside my bedroom window, a few hours later. I'd lain awake worrying: if you translated that from the colloquial foxese, would it mean "We have been persecuted by the British upper classes and tabloid newspapers for aeons

and now even Tom, one of the few people we thought we could trust, is against us. Who next? Chris Packham?"?

In sympathy, in the pub in Norwich the following week, friends offered their own tales of fraught or tragic encounters on country lanes. One told a story of roadkill-eating acquaintances in Devon who saw a deer run over by some boy racers in the northern part of Dartmoor and, presuming it to be dead, put it in the back of their Ford Mondeo estate, only for it to wake up just as they arrived at Tavistock. Discovering that some of my friends had hit deer, badgers and foxes before didn't make me feel much better. I'd driven almost every road in Norfolk and Suffolk over the twelve and a half years I'd lived here and, until now, the only fatality had been one pheasant. Had I glanced away from the windscreen for a split second before I'd hit the fox, altering my chances to brake in time? I didn't think so. Had tiredness been a factor? Perhaps. I wondered what I could do to prevent something like this happening again.

I did think of one thing I could change. I've been rushing about a bit recently and visiting lots of new areas in a new part of the country, so I've developed a habit while driving of letting my eyes wander momentarily away from the road to my atlas. I had not been doing this when I had hit the fox, but what if I did in the future, when another fox happened to be nearby, en route to a bin it particularly liked?

Many would claim that the simple solution here would be to face up to the fact that we are now living in the year 2003, and get myself a satnav unit, but I've preferred to opt for a more old-fashioned approach: planning out a route beforehand and bluetacking it to my dashboard, just like my dad used to when I was a kid. I'll sometimes print out an AA route planner route, if pushed, but that's as far as I'll go. I eschew satnav for the

same reason that I never write an emoticon or make a voice-activated call: I tell myself it's my small contribution to the postponement of the robot uprising that now seems an inevitable part of our future. Second, just as I will never read an ebook for fear of hurting the feelings of the real books on my shelves, I abstain from satnav because maps have always been good to me and I don't want to make them cry. An above-average ability to navigate my way manually from one obscure part of the country to another is a big part of how I define myself. Thousands of years ago, one of my forebears might have satisfied the primal, hunter-gatherer-explorer part of himself by capturing and eating a wild pig. I feed the same urge by finding my way from, say, Compton Pauncefoot to Barnstaple, then buying some obscure secondhand folk records.

I already worry about what the internet has done to my brain: how its social networks have acted like a cheese grater on my attention span and its endless archives of trivia have compromised my ability to retain facts. I don't want a satnav to pulp my ability to be good with directions. I've loved road maps for as long as I can remember: all the way back to the 80s, when I would help my parents navigate from Nottinghamshire to a campsite on Italy's west coast in our clapped out Morris Marina. I adore OS maps even more: the magical door they open to history, their intricate art, the way they concertina out and reveal the secrets of landscape we take for granted, the fact that they frequently contain the word "tumulus". No matter how much of the countryside is blighted by bland executive new builds or SUVs, it always looks pretty on a map.

An occasional problem with maps is that I tend to trust everything they tell me. A fortnight ago, on an eight-mile walk near the seaside town of Sheringham, I learned one of the big rules of Norfolk coastal rambling: avoid using guides more than a decade old, as it could result in erosion-themed death.

I'm now pleased to note that, after years of looking a little too pristine, my OS maps are also beginning to acquire a more weatherbeaten appearance: a measure of me not being quite such a coward about planning my own routes. I'm now in a rambler's equivalent of the phase where a cook breaks free from the shackles of the recipe book or a musician starts to experiment outside their customary genre. It can sometimes lead to results that are equally embarrassing – a kind of freeform jazz version of country walking – but, at its best, can be satisfying and revelatory. In many urban hipster's brains, a country walk with an OS map is associated with a tame "little Englishness". But there's something very liberating about looking on a map and seeing, say, something called "Alecock's Grave" a mile to your east, then thinking, "I'd quite like to know what Alecock's Grave is", then thinking: "HOLD ON! I actually can go and see Alecock's Grave and nobody is going to stop me!" GPS tends foster the opposite of that, a zombified extension of something the musician and rural warrior Julian Cope bemoaned 14 years ago: "People don't go anywhere nowadays unless there's a sign."

While I was on a lovely circular riverside walk with three friends near Buxton in North Norfolk on a crisp bright day last month, my friend Drew found a jar hidden beneath a

stile, inside which had been placed a folded piece of paper with "Happy New Year!" written on it. Such a pleasing discovery makes me half want to try geocaching, but I'm still dubious about the satellite aspect of it. I don't want to walk with a screen in front of me because a country walk is supposed to be the endorphin-boosting antithesis of staring at a screen.



It's behind you: a

screen can be very distracting. Photograph: Calum Dickson/Alamy

Looking at a map might distract you from the scenery – particularly if, like me, you sometimes find said map smothering you as you try to fold it – but it's more at one with the scenery than a screen could ever be. A map won't suddenly stop telling you where you are when you reach a small hollow with bad reception. A screen sucks you in, away from the moment. You could miss all manner of stuff while staring at a screen, and who knows what it could cost you? As you obsessively check your location, and follow the dot, you could obviously pass a small neolithic monument hiding in the corner of a field, a sun-dappled river view that could fill up your heart with gladness, or even something a little more sinister: a fox, say, poking its head out of the undergrowth and fixing you with a glare that says, in no uncertain terms: "I have your number, Sunshine: you killed my cousin Ken near Haverhill the other week, and, mark my words, one day you will pay."

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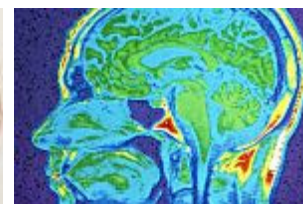
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