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WALKING

# ST OSWALD'S WAY AND NORTHUMBERLAND COAST PATH

Heavenfield and Cresswell to Holy Island



Rudolf Abraham

**WALKING ST OSWALD'S WAY  
AND NORTHUMBERLAND  
COAST PATH**

**HEAVENFIELD AND CRESSWELL TO HOLY ISLAND**

**by Rudolf Abraham**

**CICERONE**

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*For Ivana and Tamara*

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*Front cover:* View of Goswick Sands from Cheswick Sands (NCP, Stage 6)

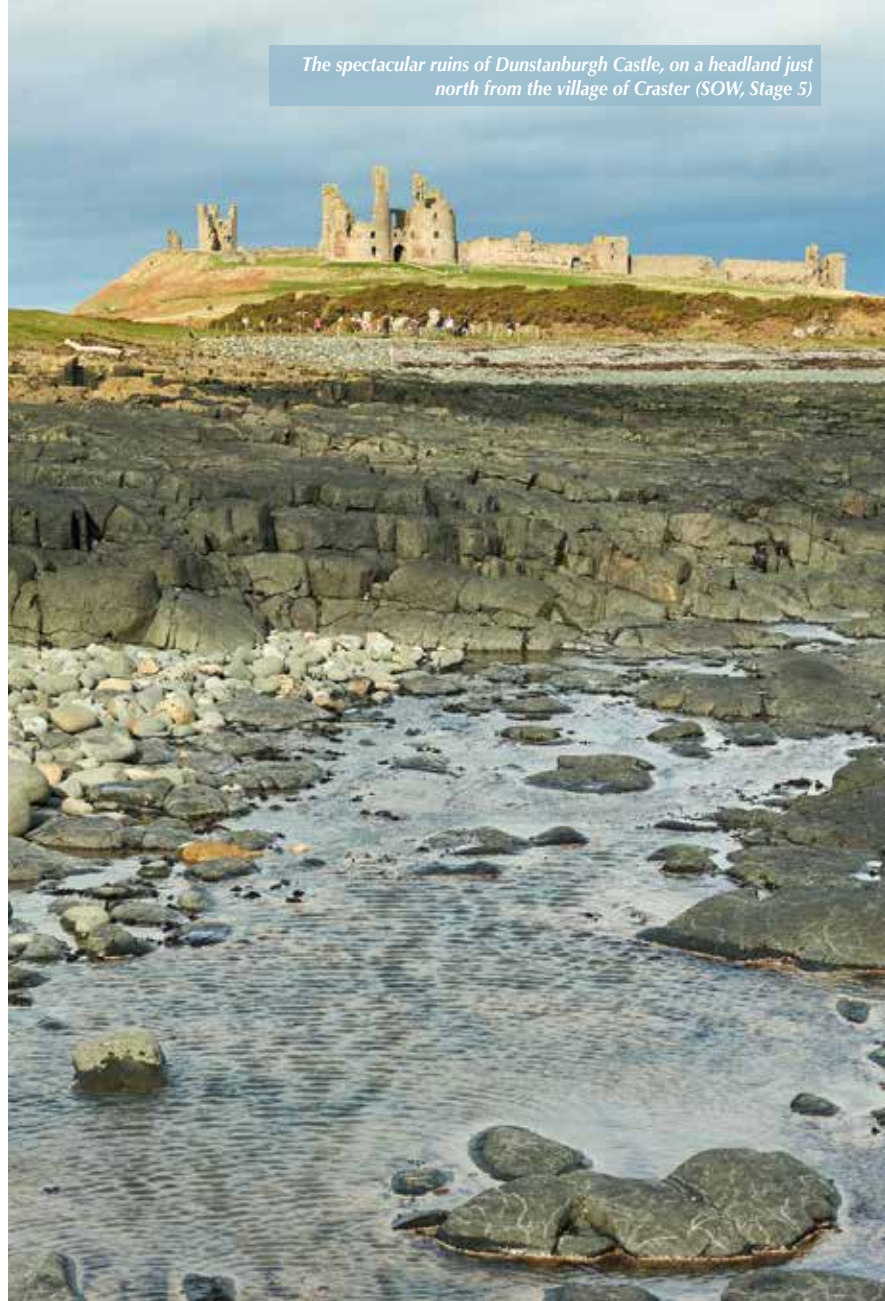
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*The spectacular ruins of Dunstanburgh Castle, on a headland just north from the village of Craster (SOW, Stage 5)*



Route symbols on OS map extracts	Features on the overview map
 route	 County/Unitary boundary
 alternative/extension	 National boundary
 adjacent trail	 Urban area
 start point	 National park
 finish point	 Forest Park/National Forest
 alternative start point	 Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
 alternative finish point	 National Scenic Area
 direction of walk	

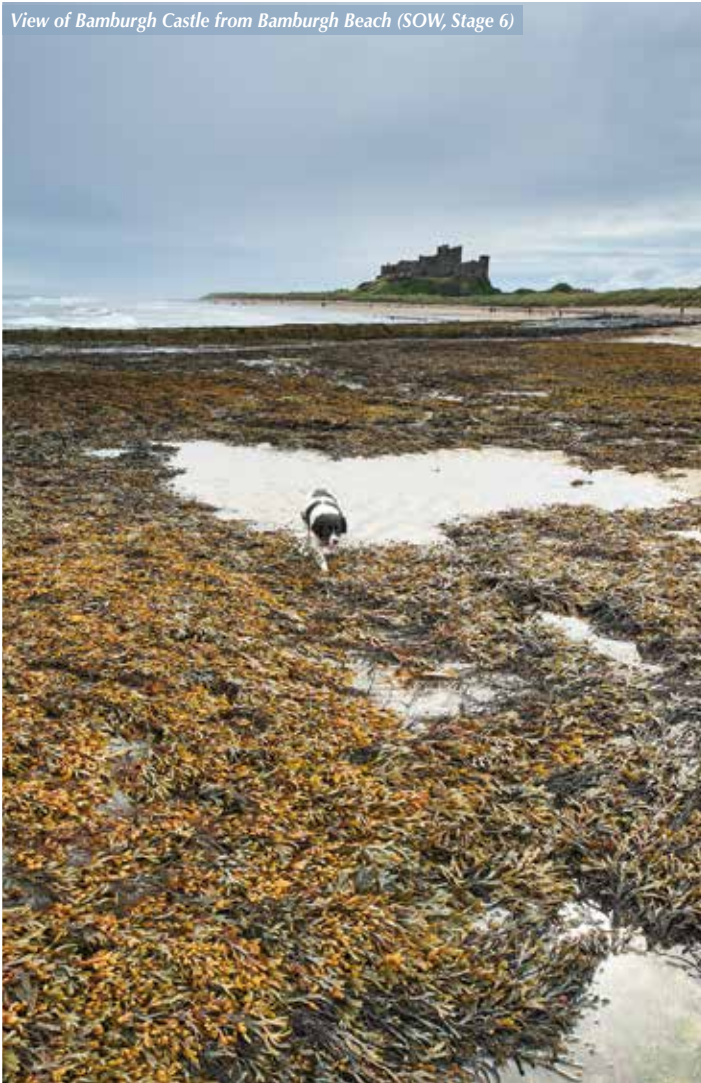
For OS legend see OS maps.

### Abbreviations

The abbreviations used for the main route names in the text are as follows:

- **SOW** St Oswald's Way
- **NCP** Northumberland Coast Path
- **NST** North Sea Trail

View of Bamburgh Castle from Bamburgh Beach (SOW, Stage 6)



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

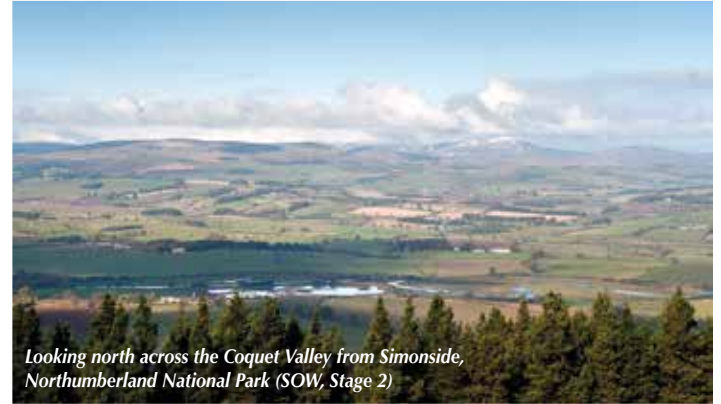
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Lindisfarne Castle and harbour, Holy Island (Lindisfarne)  
(SOW, Stage 7)



## INTRODUCTION



Looking north across the Coquet Valley from Simonside,  
Northumberland National Park (SOW, Stage 2)

For with the flow and ebb, its style  
Varies from continent to isle;  
Dry shod o'er sands, twice every day,  
The pilgrims to the shrine find way;  
Twice every day the waves efface  
Of staves and sandalled feet the trace.

*Marmion, Sir Walter Scott*

I first visited Northumberland National Park in the late autumn of 2008, spending a memorable weekend near Rothbury, and following a trail up onto the Simonside Hills. As I stood on the craggy sandstone summit, surrounded by a sea of heather – grazed by feral goats and punctuated by the occasional Iron Age cairn – the low cloud suddenly dissipated to

reveal a view stretching out over the Northumberland coast, drenched in mauve and gold and pierced by shafts of sunlight. I have been returning to this most beautiful corner of the British Isles ever since.

St Oswald's Way is an outstanding long-distance trail that leads the walker through a beautiful, diverse and at times remote landscape – from

farmland to rugged hills, and from sandstone outcrops and heather moorland to enormous sandy beaches and rolling coastal dunes. The route is enhanced by a wealth of birdlife, and is rich with a staggering amount of historical interest.

St Oswald's Way stretches 100 miles (161km) across Northumberland from Heavenfield, on Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland, to Holy Island (Lindisfarne) on the Northumberland coast – however, it's well worth continuing up the coast to Berwick-upon-Tweed (following the final stage of the Northumberland Coast Path, included in this guide), making a total distance of 111½ miles (179.5km). This additional stage provides both superb coastal scenery, and takes advantage of the better transport links in Berwick-upon-Tweed.

The trail passes through Northumberland National Park and takes in almost the whole length of the Northumberland Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). At times it meets with and shares its route with other, well-known trails, including St Cuthbert's Way and Hadrian's Wall Path, and almost the entire length of the Northumberland Coast Path. Indeed, if at the end of St Oswald's Way you continue from Holy Island up the coast to Berwick-upon-Tweed as recommended (following Stage 6 of the Northumberland Coast Path as described here), you'd only have to add the short section from Cresswell

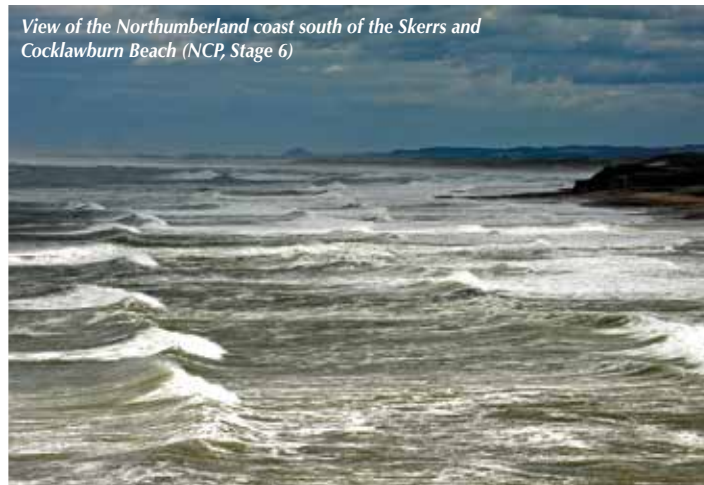
to Warkworth (also included in this guide) to have walked the whole of the Northumberland Coast Path. St Oswald's Way visits some magnificent architecture – rambling castles, Norman churches, medieval abbeys – as well as sites of enormous archaeological and geological interest, quiet villages and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) – and, come to that, some outstandingly good pubs. Access by public transport is straightforward, trails are mostly well maintained and clearly marked, and the walking itself is easy.

Despite its many charms, St Oswald's Way sees remarkably few walkers in comparison to most other long-distance trails in the UK. Northumberland National Park not only has the lowest population density of any national park in Britain, but also some of the lowest visitor numbers – a distinction that is both a great pity (because it is an absolutely beautiful area), and at the same time one of its great charms – it is a world away from the crowds of some of Britain's more frequented wild places. Much the same could be said for Northumberland as a whole.

### GEOLOGY

During the Carboniferous period, around 360–290 million years ago, the area that would eventually become Northumberland was submerged beneath a shallow

*View of the Northumberland coast south of the Skerris and Cocklawburn Beach (NCP, Stage 6)*



tropical sea, somewhere near the equator. Ages of deposition of shells and other marine life on the bed of this sea formed layers of limestone, which were then overlaid by vast amounts of mud and sediment from large river deltas. Swamps developed on these deltas and forests grew, and in time the peat and plant debris from these were covered by further layers of sedimentation. Changes in sea level caused this cycle to repeat itself over millions of years, creating the limestone, sandstone, coal and shale that typify the area's landscape today, and the layers of sedimentary rock so evident on the Northumberland coast, folded and faulted over subsequent millennia. Distinctive folds of limestone can be seen at Cocklawburn, between

Goswick and Berwick-upon-Tweed, and limestone bands project into the sea nearby as the Skerris. Inland, the fell sandstone formed during this period can be seen in the Simonside Hills and Harbottle Crag; on the coast, sandstone appears at Longhoughton Steel near Boulmer, and south towards Alnmouth.

The single most distinctive geological feature of Northumberland is the Whin Sill. A great elongated sheet of dolerite rock, it was formed when molten rock oozed up through cracks and fissures in the earth's crust then spread out between layers of sedimentary rock, during the end of the Carboniferous period, some 295 million years ago. Its distinctive vertical cracks and columns were formed as the molten rock cooled.

The Whin Sill stretches from one side of the county to the other, and upon its hard outcrops are built many of Northumberland's most prominent monuments, including Hadrian's Wall, Lindisfarne Castle and Bamburgh Castle. In the east it splinters off the Northumberland coast in features such as Harkess Rocks near Bamburgh, making its easternmost appearance with the Farne Islands, and its southernmost appearance near Craster, at Cullernose Point. Dolerite is often known as whinstone in Northumberland.

Successive periods of glaciation from around 2 million to 12,000 years ago scoured the landscape and shaped it into its present form, leaving the broad, familiar U-shaped valleys, as well as meltwater channels and

the vast, undulating and mineral-rich deposits that coat much of the landscape today. These glaciers also carried and deposited rocks far from their geological origin – attested by the presence of blocks of volcanic rock from the Cheviots on the Northumberland and Yorkshire coasts. One well-known 'erratic' boulder is the Hunkleton Stone at Newbiggin-by-the-Sea.

Sand dunes form a fairly narrow band along parts of the Northumberland coast, the largest and most extensive of these being found at Cheswick Sands and Goswick Sands, and The Snook on Holy Island. While there are some very old dunes based on glacial sands and clays in Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve (Ross Links, for example, on

the mainland south of Holy Island, contains some of the oldest dunes in Britain), the majority of sand dunes on the Northumberland coast are relatively young, formed over the last 200–300 years. Due to their age, the older dunes are more acidic, which is reflected in the plant species that grow there. The enormous erosive power of the sea is everywhere apparent as you walk along the north Northumberland coast – perhaps nowhere more so than Alnmouth, where a storm in 1806 blasted through the sand dunes, permanently altering the position of the mouth of the River Aln.

#### WEATHER

Northumberland's geographical position on the northeast coast of England acts as a moderating influence as far as climate is concerned – meaning that although statistics point to it being on average the coldest county in England, it escapes the extremes of some other areas in the UK.

Summer temperatures at Boulmer on the Northumberland coast reach an average daytime high of around 18°C in July and August (the highest recorded in the past three decades was 28.2°C in August 1990), with an average low of 10.8°C for the same months. June and September have average maximum temperatures of 15.6°C and 15.9°C respectively, and average minimum temperatures of 8.6°C and 9.1°C; the same values for May

and October are 12.5°C/5.9°C and 12.8°C/6.7°C respectively. January has the lowest average temperatures, with an average maximum of 6.7°C and an average minimum of 1.3°C (although in January 1982 it plummeted to –12.3°C), with February only very marginally higher. Wind chill must be added to these temperatures, which will make them feel considerably cooler. May and June see the greatest number of hours of sunshine, followed by July and August. Average sea surface temperatures on the Northumberland coast are, as might be expected, quite low (around 13°C in summer, compared to 18°C on England's southwest coast). Inland, temperatures are similar to those on the coast but decrease with altitude – thus upland areas such as the Simonside Hills will be several degrees cooler.

Rainfall in Northumberland is less than experienced in the northwest of England, with an average annual precipitation of 651mm on the coast, and between 890mm (low-lying areas) and 1145mm (in Northumberland National Park – compare these figures with the Lake District, which has an average annual precipitation of over 3200mm in some areas). November is usually the wettest month, with an average rainfall of 67.2mm on the Northumberland coast, while July typically sees the least rainfall of the summer months (47.6mm) and August the most (62.1mm).

Snowfall occurs mainly in January and February, but snow can



*Statue of St Cuthbert by Fenwick Lawson, in the ruins of Lindisfarne Priory, Holy Island (SOW, Stage 7)*



*The Vallum (earthworks) at Hadrian's Wall (SOW, Stage 1)*



fall any time between November and March in the hills, with snow lying on average 10 days a year on the coast, more in the hills.

Winds are for the most part moderate, and gusts rarely reach above 21mph in the summer – although winds reaching gale force are not unknown, despite being uncommon. The windiest months on the coast are December to March, with average gusts reaching over 35mph; the calmest months are June, July and August.

Nevertheless, bear in mind that all these figures are averages, and variations can be considerable – so check local weather forecasts (see [www.metoffice.gov.uk](http://www.metoffice.gov.uk) and [www.mwis.org.uk](http://www.mwis.org.uk)). As an example, in February 2021 the temperature at Chillingham Barns inland from

Bamburgh got down to  $-12^{\circ}\text{C}$ ; and in the winter of 2010 heavy snowfall began in Northumberland in November (around 30cm in one day, including on the coast) and continued for several days, with temperatures dipping to around  $-9^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

#### WILDLIFE AND PLANTS

##### Wildlife

The landscape of Northumberland is home to an extraordinarily rich and diverse range of wildlife. Its forests are one of the last strongholds of Britain's native red squirrel population – more than half the entire UK red squirrel population lives in Kielder Forest alone – while otters still live alongside its remote, clear streams and burns, stoats



*Flagstone trail on Simonside, Northumberland National Park, a short distance off St Oswald's Way (SOW, Stage 2)*

*Walking on the beach between Warkworth and Alnmouth, with Coquet Island in the distance (Stage 4)*



However, you might want to add to this getting to or from Heavenfield (an additional 1½ miles (2.5km) from Wall, or 4½ miles (7.5km) from Hexham); and you are strongly encouraged to continue along the Northumberland Coast Path from Holy Island to Berwick-upon-Tweed (an additional 10½ miles (17km) from the Holy Island causeway, or around 11½ miles (18.5km) from Holy Island itself), rather than walking back to West Mains along the road and waiting for a bus – adding an additional, eighth stage to the route. While not part of the official route, this makes a wonderful addition to an already fabulous walk, and gives you a grand total of 111½ miles (179km) or 113 miles (182km) (from Heavenfield or Wall respectively to Berwick-upon-Tweed).

In this guide, St Oswald's Way is described as follows:

- **Stage 1** Heavenfield to Kirkwhelpington – 17½ miles (28.5km), or 19 miles (31km) if starting from Wall
- **Stage 2** Kirkwhelpington to Rothbury – 15 miles (24km)
- **Stage 3** Rothbury to Warkworth – 18 miles (29km)
- **Stage 4** Warkworth to Craster – 13½ miles (21.5km)
- **Stage 5** Craster to Bamburgh – 14 miles (22km)
- **Stage 6** Bamburgh to West Mains – 14½ miles (23.5km)
- **Stage 7** West Mains to Holy Island – 7½ miles (12km)

If you continue to Berwick-upon-Tweed as recommended (see Stage 6 of the Northumberland Coast Path), add:

- **Stage 8** Holy Island to Berwick-upon-Tweed – 11½ miles (18.5km)

There is scope for shortening or lengthening these stages, to walk the

route in fewer days (say, seven days minimum, by walking Stages 6 and 7 in one day) or more (the world's your oyster). You might also consider spending an additional half or full day (that is, two nights) on Holy Island or based at West Mains, to explore Holy Island properly. Bear in mind that there is no accommodation at intermediate points on or near the route on Stages 1 and 2 (or more specifically between Hadrian's Wall and Knowesgate, and Knowesgate and Rothbury). From here on, however (Rothbury to Berwick-upon-Tweed), there are plenty of opportunities for walking shorter stages (for example stopping at Weldon Bridge or Felton on Stage 3, Alnmouth or Boulmer on Stage 4).

For reference, the 'standard' route (Holy Island to Heavenfield) is usually divided as follows:

- **Stage 1** Holy Island to Bamburgh – 19 miles (31km)

- **Stage 2** Bamburgh to Craster – 14 miles (22km)
- **Stage 3** Craster to Warkworth – 13½ miles (21.5km)
- **Stage 4** Warkworth to Rothbury – 18 miles (29km)
- **Stage 5** Rothbury to Kirkwhelpington – 15 miles (24km)
- **Stage 6** Kirkwhelpington to Heavenfield – 17½ miles (28.5km)

Walkers can apply for a certificate after completing St Oswald's Way, but will need to have purchased a certificate pack (which can be ordered from Shepherd Walks, [www.shepherdswalks.co.uk](http://www.shepherdswalks.co.uk)). The pack includes a sheet for making rubbings from the raised motif at the corner of six information panels found along the route, as proof of completion.

For more details about transport options and getting around see Transport in the main introduction.



*Sheds made from overturned boat hulls, Holy Island (Lindisfarne)(Stage 7)*

## STAGE 1

*Heavenfield to Kirkwhelpington*

<b>Start</b>	Wooden cross, Heavenfield, or 880 bus stop, Wall
<b>Finish</b>	Post office, Kirkwhelpington
<b>Distance</b>	17½ miles (28.5km) from Heavenfield; 19 miles (31km) from Wall
<b>Time</b>	8hrs 15mins or 8hrs 45mins
<b>Maps</b>	OS Explorer OL42, OL43 and 316; OS Landranger 87 and 81
<b>Access</b>	LNER to Newcastle, followed by a train to Hexham; or if approaching from the west, by rail from Carlisle to Hexham. From Hexham take the AD122 bus to Heavenfield. Alternatively (or outside April to September, when the AD122 does not run), take the 680 to Wall, and walk N on the A6079 to pick up Hadrian's Wall Path just outside the village. Turn R onto Hadrian's Wall Path, crossing the B6320 at Planetrees Farm. Otherwise it is only a short taxi ride from Hexham to Heavenfield ( <a href="http://www.advancedtaxi.com">www.advancedtaxi.com</a> , tel 01434 606565).
<b>Accommodation</b>	This is the most problematic stage for accommodation along the whole route. There's no accommodation in Kirkwhelpington itself. The nearest place to stay is the Knowesgate Hotel in Knowesgate, a further 1¼ miles (2km) into Stage 2 (and which has never had particularly good reviews). Sadly the nearby Cornhills Farm B&B closed recently. There is no alternative accommodation at any intermediate point between Hadrian's Wall and Knowesgate.
<b>Note</b>	There are no SOW trail markings until leaving Hadrian's Wall Path.

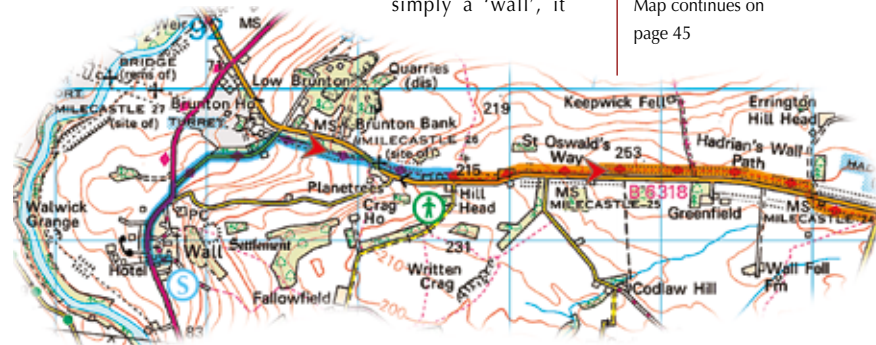
This is an easy day, following Hadrian's Wall Path initially then crossing farmland with a gentle climb over Todridge Fell, and visiting several villages. The route entails paths and tracks with a fairly long (but not uninteresting) stretch of road walking. Although it is possible to walk from Hexham to Heavenfield at the beginning of this stage, this makes it a very long day – 22 miles (36km).

Before heading to Heavenfield, it is well worth visiting Hexham Abbey. The priory church (now the parish church of St Andrew) was built in the 12th century, on the site of an earlier seventh-century church (which later became a cathedral, until the bishop moved to Lindisfarne) damaged by Viking raids. The crypt survives largely intact from the original seventh-century building, and the stone chair upon which the bishop once sat can still be seen inside the church.

**Heavenfield**, at the south end of SOW, marks the approximate site of the Battle of Heavenfield, in which Oswald son of Aethelfrith defeated King Caedwalla of Wales and Penda of Mercia in around 635, and regained the crown of Bernicia and Deira (Northumbria). Oswald erected a large wooden cross at Heavenfield, and is said to have asked his soldiers to pray before battle. The present wooden cross dates from the 1920s, and replaced an earlier stone one. There is an annual pilgrimage from Hexham Abbey to the small 18th-century Church of St Oswald at Heavenfield, on or around 5 August.

**Hadrian's Wall** was mostly built in AD120–130 under the Roman Emperor Hadrian. It stretches some 80 Roman miles – that is, around 73 miles (117km) – between Wallsend on the River Tyne in the east and Bowness-on-Solway in the west. More than simply a 'wall', it

Map continues on  
page 45





The Vallum (earthworks) at Hadrian's Wall

was a highly complex barrier consisting of a stone wall fronted on the north by a V-shaped ditch, a series of milecastles, forts and turrets (connected by a metalled road, the Roman Military Way, much of it now the B6318), and a broad series of earthworks and ditch to the south (the Vallum), together with a number of outlying forts. (The Vallum is particularly well preserved on the section of SOW just east of the A68.) Its function is thought to have been administrative as much as defensive, its numerous gates acting as customs posts for the collection of taxes. For much of its course the wall follows the Whin Sill, making use of its many rocky outcrops. Hadrian's Wall remains one of the best-preserved and complex Roman frontiers in the world, and was inscribed on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites in 1987 (<http://hadrianswallcountry.co.uk>).

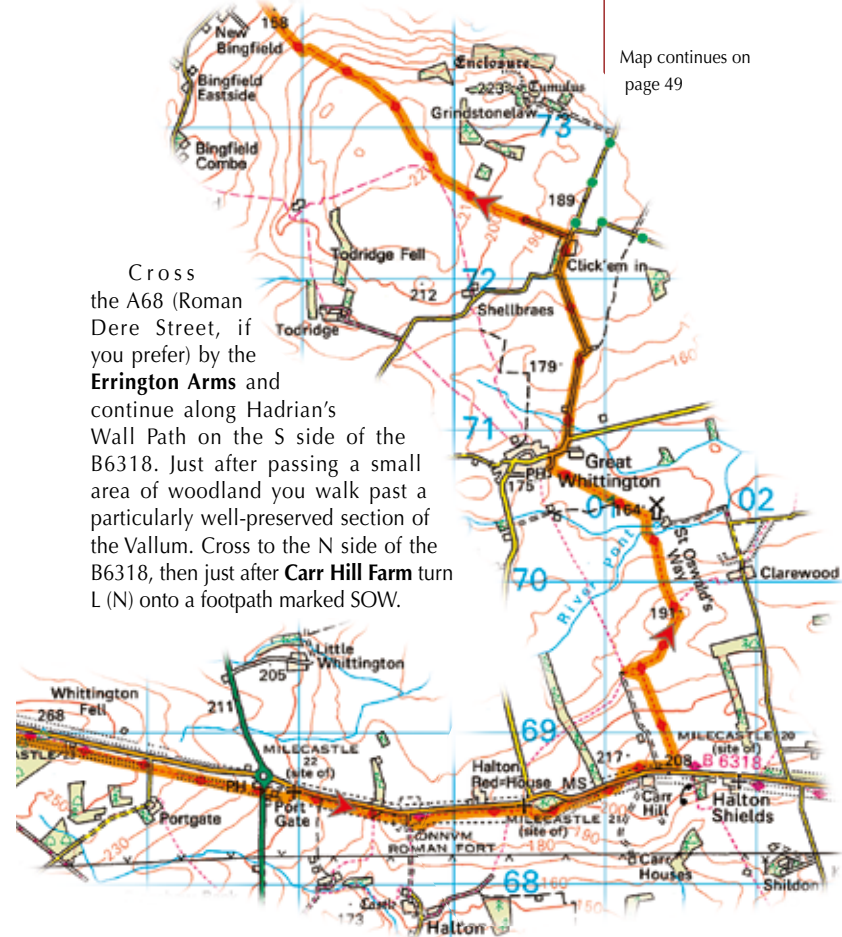
Storm damage in 2022 temporarily closed the path through the plantation, so you may need to continue along the B6318 as far as the sideroad and rejoin the path there.

Follow signs for Hadrian's Wall Path E from **Heavenfield**, passing St Oswald's Hill Farm and walking parallel to and just N of the B6318. After around 1½ miles (2.5km), cross with care to the S side of the road, walking through the edge of Stanley Plantation and crossing a sideroad to reach the junction with the **A68**. ◀



**Dere Street** was a Roman road running between the Firth of Forth, near Edinburgh, and York (where it connected with the Roman road running south to London and Dover), and was probably constructed around AD80. At this point (and elsewhere) its course is hidden beneath the A68, although some other sections are not and are clearly defined on the landscape.

Cross the A68 (Roman Dere Street, if you prefer) by the **Errington Arms** and continue along Hadrian's Wall Path on the S side of the B6318. Just after passing a small area of woodland you walk past a particularly well-preserved section of the Vallum. Cross to the N side of the B6318, then just after **Carr Hill Farm** turn L (N) onto a footpath marked SOW.



Map continues on page 49

The remains of Whittington Mill, an 18th-century windmill near the village of Great Whittington



Follow the edge of the field, then turn L across the far end and R again along the edge of another field. SOW originally went straight ahead at this point, passing West Clarewood and the site of a deserted medieval village, but the route was changed in 2008. Turn L uphill towards the small group of trees at Toft Hill, then downhill past these trees with the ruin of **Whittington Mill** ahead. Turn L then cross the bridge over the **River Pont** to reach Whittington Mill, the impressive remains of an 18th-century stone windmill. Follow the path NW from the windmill to arrive at the village of **Great Whittington**.

**Great Whittington** is an attractive little village just west of Matfen, with mostly 19th-century stone housing and a small Methodist chapel, now a private house. There's a pub here (The Queen's Head, [www.thequeensheadgw.com](http://www.thequeensheadgw.com)), which does food but not accommodation. The 74 bus stops in Great Whittington.

Turn R onto the road, following it round to the L, then straight ahead. Around 1 mile (1.5km) from Great Whittington, you pass **Click-Em-In Farm** – immediately after this turn L onto a track signposted to Bingfield Combe. Keep straight ahead, crossing the so-called Devil's Causeway – another Roman road, this time running from Dere Street near Corbridge to the mouth of the River Tweed near Berwick-upon-Tweed. Just before the crest of the hill turn R onto a path (no SOW markings), cutting across the corner of a field near the channel of a small stream. Follow the edge of the field to the R then turn L through a gate, and R alongside the edge of the field. Go through another gate and veer diagonally across a field with the highest point of Todridge Fell and Duns Moor (222m) on your L. ▶

The stile on the far side of the field is not obvious at first, being hidden in a slight depression just to the R of a stone wall. Descend alongside this wall, passing some sort of small quarry pit on your R. Veer L then R around

There are good views from here over the Tyne Valley to the S; the strip of water ahead of you to the NW is Hallington Reservoir.



*Whittledean Watercourse (from Hallington Reservoir) running beside Hallington Hall*

the edge of a small plantation, then descend alongside a wall to reach a road.

Follow the road to the R then L, to reach a crossroads by a **war memorial**. Keep straight ahead, to reach the village of **Hallington**.

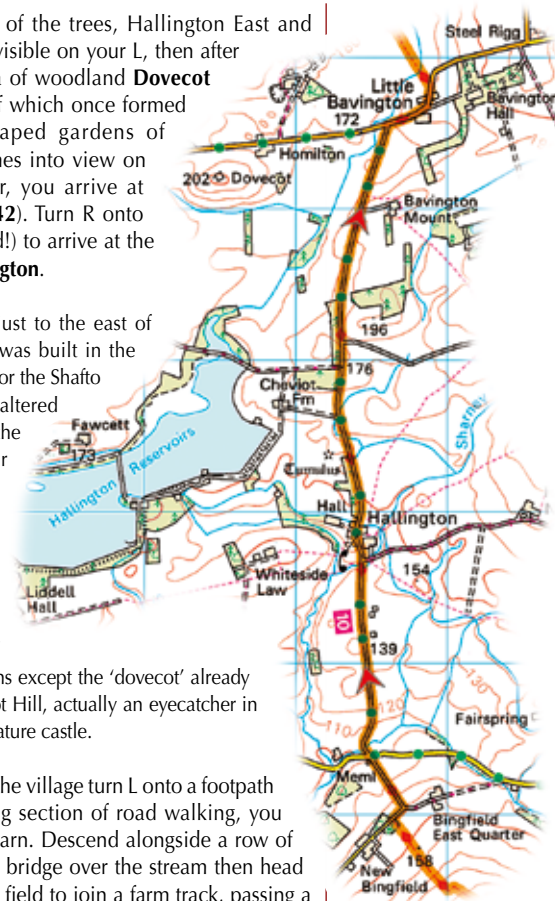
**Hallington** is a small settlement, consisting of little more than a farm and the rather grand Hallington Hall. Hallington Hall was built in 1768 for Ralph Soulsby, although it was modified later in the 18th century and mid-19th century. To the northwest are a series of four reservoirs, built between 1863 and 1880 for the Newcastle and Gateshead Water Company; Hallington East and Hallington West are the two nearest, with Little Swinburne and Colt Crag Reservoirs beyond. Together they form an important wintering area for wildfowl. The Whittledean Watercourse, running alongside Hallington Hall, carries water away towards Newcastle.

Follow the road out of Hallington, alongside a narrow strip of woodland and a moss-covered stone

wall. At the far end of the trees, Hallington East and West Reservoirs are visible on your L, then after passing another area of woodland **Dovecot Hill** (the 'dovecot' of which once formed part of the landscaped gardens of Bavington Hall) comes into view on your L. Shortly after, you arrive at the main road (**B6342**). Turn R onto this (caution required!) to arrive at the village of **Little Bavington**.

**Bavington Hall**, just to the east of Little Bavington, was built in the late 17th century for the Shafto family, although altered and extended in the 18th century for its subsequent owner, Admiral Delaval. It was once surrounded by extensive landscaped gardens – of which little remains except the 'dovecot' already passed on Dovecot Hill, actually an eyecatcher in the form of a miniature castle.

At the far side of the village turn L onto a footpath – the end of this long section of road walking, you may be pleased to learn. Descend alongside a row of trees, cross the small bridge over the stream then head diagonally across the field to join a farm track, passing a small plantation on your R. Turn L onto a path just before a gate, ascending with a wall on your R and Bavington Crags (an outcrop of the Whin Sill) on your L. Turn L at **Clay Walls Farm**, briefly following the edge of a small plantation then turning R through this and L over fields to join the asphalt farm track a little way beyond the farm buildings. Turn L onto the farm track, then where



Map continues on page 51



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