

CICERONE

WALKING THE RIBBLE WAY

A one-week walk across Lancashire into
Yorkshire from Preston to the source



Dennis and Jan Kelsall

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A ONE-WEEK WALK ACROSS LANCASHIRE INTO
YORKSHIRE FROM PRESTON TO THE SOURCE

by Dennis and Jan Kelsall

CICERONE

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Front cover: Looking down Ribblesdale towards Pen-y-ghent (Stage 6)

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Heading back into the fields beside the Shireburn Arms (Stage 3)











ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

Stage	Distance	Height Gain	Time	Page
1 Longton to Penwortham Bridge	8¼ miles (13.3km)	190ft (60m)	3½ hrs	18
2 Penwortham Bridge to Ribchester	12¼ miles (19.7km)	720ft (220m)	5¾ hrs	27
3 Ribchester to Brungerley Bridge	12½ miles (20.1km)	900ft (275m)	6 hrs	38
4 Brungerley Bridge to Gisburn Bridge	9½ miles (15.3km)	760ft (230m)	4½ hrs	53
5 Gisburn Bridge to Settle	12½ miles (20.1km)	740ft (225m)	5¾ hrs	65
6 Settle to Horton in Ribblesdale	7¾ miles (12.5km)	890ft (270m)	4 hrs	78
7 Horton in Ribblesdale to the source and back to Ribblehead	17 miles (27.4km) ^a	2020ft (615m)	8¾ hrs ^b	89

^a including 6¼ miles (10.1km) back to Ribblehead

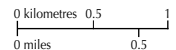
^b including 3¾ hours back to Ribblehead

Route symbols on OS map extracts

	route		start/finish point		alternative start/finish point
	alternative route		start point		alternative start point
	link route/detour		finish point		alternative finish point
	route direction				

for OS legend see printed OS maps

SCALE: 1:50,000



GPX files

for all routes can be downloaded free at www.cicerone.co.uk/1091/GPX

INTRODUCTION



Beside the Ribble towards Giggleswick (Stage 5)



Approaching Horton in Ribblesdale (Stage 6)

Although Lancastrians might like to claim it as their own, the River Ribble actually springs from limestone high on Cam Fell in the heart of Three Peaks country, in the Yorkshire Dales. Gathering water from the countless streams that spill from this sombre upland, the river quickly asserts its identity as it forces a passage between high, rugged moorland hills. Eventually breaking free to meander through gentler countryside south of Settle, it still has another 10 miles (16.1km) to go before broaching the boundary with Lancashire. Yorkshire folk with long memories will remember an older border between the rival counties that ran south of Sawley, and they might say that the river here still remains in Yorkshire.

By the time it reaches Gisburn, the river has assumed a completely different character, winding lazily through alternating pasture and ancient woodland, where old manor houses and early-18th-century cottages offer a welcome contrast to the all-too-pervasive tide of modernity. At Preston the river encounters the only sizeable conurbation along its course, but even here it remains largely isolated from the commerce and industry of the city. It flows instead below the elegant Victorian parks that were laid out for the recreation of the thousands of workers brought in to operate some of the first factory mills built in the country, replacing what had previously been a cottage industry.

Beyond Preston the river changes dramatically yet again, now running straight to the Irish Sea through an almost featureless plain that was once regularly inundated by the tide. Dykes and drainage ditches have turned what was once a virtually dead-flat waste into productive arable fields, although further to the west a vast expanse of the salt marsh remains, attracting huge populations of birds, particularly in winter, which find a rich and plentiful source of food in the shallows and mud.

THE RIBBLE WAY

The idea for a long-distance footpath along the course of the River Ribble originated in the 1960s with the members of the Preston and Fylde group of the Ramblers' Association. The original survey suggested a mainly riverbank route from the mouth of the Ribble, where it flows into the Irish Sea, to its source far above Gearstones, a former drovers' inn beside the moorland road between Ribblehead and Hawes. This plan immediately ran into difficulty, however, as more than half the proposed way relied on the use of private fishermen's paths. Further progress was thwarted by a storm of local objection, and it was not until the 1980s that an alternative route adopting existing rights of way attracted official support. The first leg of the path, covering just over 40 miles (almost 65km) between Longton and Gisburn Bridge, was

opened by Mike Harding, president of the Ramblers' Association, and Derek Barber, chairman of the Countryside Commission, on 1 June 1985.

Several factors determined the start of the path. Industrial land and Preston Docks dictated that the path begin along the river's southern bank; however, starting from Banks on the coast requires an early 5-mile inland detour via Tarleton to cross the Ribble's lowest tributary, the River Douglas. So, in the end, the Dolphin Inn at Longton was chosen as the most westerly accessible start point beside the river. Dating from the early 19th century, when it was a lonely farm known as Lower Marsh Cottage and selling beer as a sideline, the pub stands beside a track out to the former Longton Ferry, which crossed the Douglas onto the Hesketh Marshes.

But things did not stand still and almost as soon as the Ribble Way opened, it was extended east beyond Gisburn Bridge right to the source



The adventure begins at the sign of the Dolphin Inn (Stage 1)

of the river, the route devised by the late Gladys Sellers, author of the first Cicerone guide to the Ribble Way. Since then there have been several marked changes to the route, sadly not all necessarily for the better as a lovely section of riverside path north from Sawley Lodge and, more lately, a short stretch along the top of Raid Deep Wood below Hurst Green have both been lost. However, on a brighter note, a route has been opened through Gisburne Park, which bypasses the town of Gisburn and eliminates a long and disagreeable walk along the busy A682.

The 72-mile (116km) route that has evolved does not always run beside the river, as was first envisaged. Nevertheless, it remains within the broad confines of the valley, and proponents of the original scheme might concede that an advantage of this occasionally elevated course is the expansive views it offers over the surrounding countryside.

The Ribble Way moves from one side of the valley to the other, generally making use of road bridges to cross the river. At Hacking Hall, where the River Calder joins the Ribble, there used to be a ferry; but with the death of the last ferryman, it ceased to operate in 1954. Although there had been an intention to replace the ferry with a footbridge, by the time the path was opened the bridge was no nearer to reality. Many hoped that the establishment of the Ribble Way and resulting increased use of



Stainforth packhorse bridge (Stage 6)

riverside footpaths would help to revitalise the scheme, but conflicting opinions as to whether the bridge should be positioned above or below the confluence with the Hodder left the project on hold. The new century brought a ray of hope when an innovative design was unveiled for a tripod bridge linking the paths on the three separate banks at the confluence of the Calder and Ribble. Had the plan come to fruition, the need to detour via Lower Hodder Bridge would have been removed, and many new possibilities for local walks would have been created. Unfortunately, the economic climate changed and the plan was abandoned, but who knows? Perhaps one day...

No doubt other changes will occur over the course of time, for like the river itself, nothing is constant.

LANDSCAPE

Despite the river's relatively short length (75 miles/121km), it travels through a great diversity of landscape. The bleakness of the slate, grit and limestone hills that surround its source at Ribblehead is in sharp contrast to the richly green alluvial plains that fringe the watercourse amid the rounded slopes of central Lancashire, and the vast, reclaimed marsh through which the river escapes to the sea gives no hint of the lush, wooded banks to be found further upstream. Although for much of its way the river squirms vigorously within the confines of a broad valley, its general course is relatively uncomplicated. After initially

aligning almost with the meridian to break from the hills at Settle, it is later gently turned onto a westerly trend in search of the open sea, by the outliers of the Pennine moors. But today's river is a mere shadow of the mighty torrent of meltwater that originally gouged out the valley, released as vast sheets of ice began to retreat in the face of a warming climate barely 12,000 years ago.

INDUSTRY

In contrast to many of the fast-flowing rivers that originate in the Lancashire and Yorkshire Pennines, the Ribble is hardly touched by the industry and conurbation of recent times. The



Simon Fell and Ingleborough (Stage 7)

only towns of any size on its banks, Clitheroe and Settle, appear to turn their backs on the river, and even the flourishing city of Preston largely ignores its presence. Things could have been very different, though, for in earlier times the Ribble was both a source of power and a means of transport.

The great abbeys of Fountains and Furness held extensive tracts of land in upper Ribblesdale, and throughout the medieval period wool production, as well as mining in the surrounding hills, were important industries. Downstream the land came within the influence of the abbeys at Cockersands, Whalley and Hornby, and while sheep again prevailed on the higher ground, cattle, oats and hemp were farmed within the valley. By the 16th century an important linen industry had evolved, later

switching to cotton as trade with the New World developed. Fulling and dyeing were cottage industries, carried out in small mills on farms and in villages beside rivers until the mechanisation of the weaving and spinning processes brought the advent of the factory system at the end of the 18th century. The power of the river initially fuelled a growing number of large mills, while the construction of the Lancaster and the Leeds and Liverpool canals helped establish Preston, and even Settle, as industrial centres. Had the Leeds and Liverpool Canal been looped around Balderstone and Whalley, as was initially proposed, it would no doubt have spawned a succession of factory towns along the Ribble east of Preston. But in the end the canal followed the Calder valley and Blackburn and Burnley grew as industrial sprawls instead.



Looking down from Whernside to Ribblehead (Stage 7)

The crucial moment of change occurred with the invention of the steam engine. This immediately demonstrated its superiority over the water wheel and, even better, was not dependent on the vagaries of the weather. Industry quickly regrouped around the coalfields and along the canals and expanding railway network, where coal in bulk could be delivered quickly and relatively cheaply. Many of the early factory sites that were not so well placed gradually faded into obscurity, and consequently, unlike the neighbouring Colne and Calder valleys, that of the Ribble has remained largely rural – not a bad thing at all, and may it always remain so.

Wildlife habitats develop along the ditches and hedgerows (Stage 1)



WILDLIFE

Although the Ribble valley has remained rural, this does not mean it is a botanical paradise, for intensive agriculture and grazing have marginalised many wildflower species and the insects and other types of life they support. However, numerous stretches in the middle sections of the river are rich in natural woodland, with a few areas demonstrating continuity with the original 'wildwood'. Here, particularly in spring, a variety of native tree and shrub species, such as oak, ash, alder, beech and hawthorn, shelter an abundance of flowers, while hedgerows and the limestone uplands also support an extensive range of flora. Bluebells, ransoms and primroses are common, while violets, orchids, speedwell, cowslips and campions are among the many others you will spot.

Birds are a constant companion along the length of the path, from those congregating around the coast, to the hill and moorland species that inhabit the higher regions. In winter the marshes attract massive flocks of geese, while gulls are prolific throughout the year. Herons, guillemots, coots, moorhens and, of course, the ubiquitous duck are plentiful. Oystercatchers are common, and lapwing, curlew, plover and snipe haunt the higher reaches. Kingfishers are to be seen along the riverbanks, and in the woods and hedgerows you will find songbirds, many of which are familiar from



Fishwick Bottoms, the tidal limit of the Ribble, is 11 miles from the sea (Stage 2)

our gardens. Fox and roe deer roam freely, although they are not always easy to see, for if they sense you first they will disappear quickly into the undergrowth. Should you be about during the late evening, there is also the chance of seeing a badger.

The Ribble is very much a fisherman's river, noted for its salmon, which in autumn can present a fine spectacle in the shallower sections as they make their way upriver to spawn. Other species are common, too, such as trout and lamprey, and just about every type of coarse fish is present.

PRACTICALITIES

At around 72 miles (116km) the Ribble Way is one of the country's shorter 'long-distance' walks, and thus an ideal choice for newcomers to long-distance walking. It runs through countryside for virtually its entire length, but the path is rarely far from 'civilisation', and only in its higher reaches does it pass through a wild landscape. For the most part it is gently

pastoral, although this does not mean that the challenge it offers should be underestimated. Countryside walking can be as physically demanding as hillwalking, particularly after heavy rain or during the summer at the climax of vegetation growth. Substantial boots, waterproofs, appropriate clothing and a comfortable pack are necessities, and gaiters are indispensable on wet days. Shorts are rarely a good idea unless you have hardy legs, and in summer remember to take sunscreen and a hat. Some route sections offer only limited opportunities for refreshment during the course of the day, so food and drink should be carried. It is also a good idea to have a small extra 'emergency ration' in case of an unexpected delay.

For convenience the route is presented here in seven legs, broken at towns and villages where there are transport, accommodation and refreshment opportunities. However, the time taken to complete the walk from end to end will depend on personal choice and ability. No stretch of

the Ribble Way is overly demanding, and most reasonably fit people should not experience undue difficulty in completing each section. However, if you are unused to walking any distance on a daily basis, it is sensible to undertake some preparatory training beforehand.

Bed and breakfast, pub and hotel accommodation, as well as several convenient campsites and bunkhouses, are scattered along the route, enabling a range of possible itineraries. While some establishments, particularly at weekends, are reluctant to take bookings for a single night, staying an extra day here and there opens

opportunities to explore the surrounding countryside and bag some of the splendid hills that stand beside the route. Up-to-date information regarding accommodation, refreshment and transport is obtainable from local tourist information organisations, which are detailed in the appendix. If you want to take the hassle out of arranging logistics, local travel firms Byways Breaks and Brigantes Walking Holidays offer accommodation booking and luggage transfer services for independent walkers.

When to walk the Ribble Way is a matter of personal choice. Spring and autumn are perhaps the best

times of year to enjoy the colours of the landscape, while a good summer can be idyllic. Winters are generally mild, although the higher reaches of the walk are subject to the extremes of British hill weather, and excessive rainfall can be a problem at any time of year. Very heavy downfalls or prolonged wet periods can significantly raise the level of the river to the extent that sections of the path can become flooded and impassable.

When planning any long walk it is a good idea to build in some flexibility, and as the countryside surrounding the Ribble Way offers many possibilities for exploration, you will have little difficulty in finding something satisfying to occupy a spare day. The Way is also very well suited to day walking, as it generally enjoys good public transport connections and many sections offer a wide choice of other paths from which to create a range of circular walks. Suggestions for day walkers, highlighting available transport and possible return routes, are given at the end of each chapter, and 'end to enders' might find this information useful in allowing them to extend their stay to see some of the countryside beyond the official route. Longridge Fell, Pendle Hill, Pen-y-ghent, Ingleborough and Whenside are obvious attractions, all readily accessible from the route, while any number of uncrowded paths range across the lesser hills.

The Ribble valley is easy to reach from the national road and rail

networks, with both the M6 motorway and the West Coast main line serving Preston near the start of the walk. A good rail service from Ribbleshead simplifies getting home again at the end of the journey.

NAVIGATION

Route finding is not a significant problem, with original distinctive wooden RW icon waymarks and their modern equivalents used to sign the path. Be aware, however, that beyond Paythorne, signage sometimes highlights the Pennine Bridleway instead, while further



The Ribble Way at Far Cattleside (Stage 5)



Ribble Way markers (Stage 5)

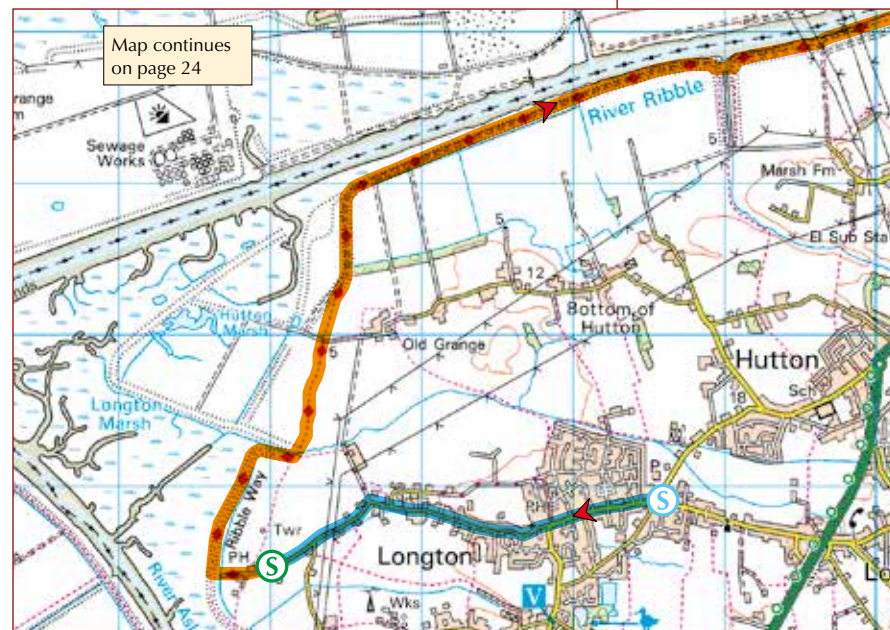
STAGE 1

Longton to Penwortham Bridge

Start	Longton
Finish	Penwortham Bridge
Distance	8¼ miles (13.3km) from the Golden Ball in Longton village, 6½ miles (10.5km) from the Dolphin Inn at the official start of the Ribble Way
Time	3½ hours
Terrain	Quiet lanes, tracks and generally good field paths; no noticeable ascent
Height gain	190ft (60m)
Maps	OS Explorer 286, Blackpool & Preston
Refreshments	The Dolphin Inn at the start of the Ribble Way and a choice of pubs in Longton and near Penwortham Bridge
Toilets	Nearby at Brickcroft Nature Reserve on Liverpool Road, Longton
Public transport	Regular bus services between Preston/Penwortham Bridge and Longton
Parking	Car parks in Preston (pay-and-display)

Beginning along the edge of the marsh overlooking the confluence of the River Ribble and the River Douglas, the walk later turns beside the Ribble to follow it in an almost dead-straight line towards Preston. Much of the surrounding land has been reclaimed from the estuary and is consequently rather flat and featureless, but as you progress upriver the buildings of Preston and its near neighbour, Penwortham, become more prominent, each occupying higher ground on opposite sides of the valley. Behind them, to the southeast, the television and communication masts of Winter Hill are an unmistakable landmark. Depending on the tide and recent rainfall, the river may present itself as anything from a disappointingly gentle flow between wide muddy banks to a full-bodied surge lunging angrily at the flood defences. Yet whatever your first impression, you can be sure that the river will adopt many more moods during its journey. While only occasionally dramatic, this stretch of the Ribble is not without interest – there is birdlife aplenty, and many reminders of the time when Preston was as much a seaport as Liverpool.

The official beginning of the Ribble Way is at the Dolphin Inn, otherwise known as the Flying Fish, which lies some 1¼ miles (2.8km) west of **Longton**. However, as public transport takes you no nearer than the Golden Ball pub in the village of Longton, without a car you must begin the walk from there. Follow Marsh Lane, which leaves the main thoroughfare, Liverpool Road, beside the pub. It is a pleasant start to the walk and you soon leave the houses behind as the lane meanders across a dead-flat hedged landscape. Keep going past the end of Grange Lane, but where the main lane then bends left, carry on ahead, still on Marsh Lane, to the Dolphin Inn. The way continues beyond the pub along a short track leading to the outer flood defence, a high grassy embankment that separates the reclaimed farmland from the salt marsh beyond. Climb onto the top and follow it away to the right.



Although richly green and a good 5 miles (8km) from the open sea, the expanse of **salt marsh** below the outer face of the dyke is still liable to inundation. Even at ordinary high tide this grassy waste is broken by silvery pools and winding runnels as the rising water invades every vulnerable depression – it is certainly no place for the inexperienced to venture alone. However, the salt marsh is a rich feeding ground for birds, and in winter particularly you will see huge flocks of geese, ducks, gulls and waders. Less appealing is the flotsam washed in on spring tides and by winter storms and left stranded as a snaking line of detritus at the limit of the flood. But look above it and you will see in the middle distance a glinting ribbon that is the River Douglas.

After ½ mile (800m), swing right with the dyke as it drops alongside Longton Brook. When you reach a field gate, go through and then swing left and right, crossing the brook to continue briefly on its opposite bank. Watch for a waymark a little further along directing you over a stile in the left hedge. Now in the corner of a large field, walk away by the right boundary. At the far side, cross a track and continue in the same direction across a second field, eventually rising onto another embankment. The River Ribble soon appears ahead, the levee turning upstream beside it to take the Ribble Way on towards Preston.

Remnants of the dredgers' mooring piers



Looking across the tidal marshes towards Lytham

If allowed to follow its own inclinations, the **River Ribble** would dissipate across a broad tidal estuary. The almost geometrical embankments that now contain it served the two-fold purpose of reclaiming fertile land and rendering the river navigable for maritime traffic. However, the wash of the tide from the sea and the silt brought down by the river are liable to obstruct the channel, and during the heyday of commercial shipping, regular dredging was necessary. Posts embedded at regular intervals along the riverbank were used to anchor the dredgers, and some still trail mooring cables and chains into the silted banks below.

Shortly after passing the outlet of Savick Brook (seen on the opposite bank), the raised pasture narrows and the route progresses over stiles across a culvert carrying Mill Brook. Carry on beneath successive power lines carried high above the river on massive gantries, and then past the entrance to Preston Dock on the far bank. The way then splits into parallel paths, taking you beside a golf course before recombining to pass an electrical substation. ▶

Further on, the former coal-fired Ribble Power Station produced electricity for Preston and Mid Lancashire from 1925 until 1976.

THE LANCASTER CANAL



The outflow of Savick Brook, navigable at high tide to the Lancaster Canal

A little further upstream on the opposite bank is the outflow of Savick Brook, which was made passable as part of a millennium project to allow pleasure barges access to the Ribble from the Lancaster Canal. Begun in 1792, the canal had originally been intended to run between Wigan and Kendal via Preston and Lancaster. The Lancaster Canal was constructed to transport coal, textiles, gunpowder and other manufactured commodities as factory production became established in Lancashire.

Although an aqueduct was built spanning the Lune upstream from Lancaster, there was insufficient capital to finance the considerably greater engineering feat of crossing the Ribble valley. Additional costs and delays prevented the canal achieving its potential, and the subsequent arrival of the railway age meant that the Ribble aqueduct was never built. The revival of canals for leisure during the latter half of the 20th century reawakened interest in joining the two halves of the Lancaster Canal, and in 1981 the Lancaster Canal Boat Club put forward a scheme to connect the northern part of the canal to the River Ribble along the course of Savick Brook using a system of locks. It was 20 years before the work was finally completed, but now boats can pass into the Ribble from the Lancaster Canal above Preston, sail down to the River Douglas and follow that up to Tarleton, where they can then enter the main Leeds and Liverpool Canal system along the Rufford Branch.



The entrance to Preston Dock

The **docks** were opened in 1892 and at the time boasted the largest dock basin in Europe. Named after Queen Victoria's eldest son, Prince Albert Edward, who finally succeeded his mother to the throne only nine years before his own death at the age of 60, they served a town rapidly developing on the back of textile manufacture and quickly became some of the busiest in the country. Warehouses, oil tanks and loading cranes once formed a backdrop to the ocean-going cargo vessels that came and went on the high tides. Preston remained a working port into the early 1980s, but despite the advantage of its proximity to both the rail and motorway networks, the dockyard's reliance on river access rendered it inaccessible to larger vessels, and trade consolidated on the better-placed docks further south at Seaforth and Bootle. The basin has, however, found a new lease of life, and since the area's redevelopment for housing, retail and leisure, is once more as busy as it ever was.

Sculptures highlight the wildlife of Priory Park



Beyond Priory Park, the ongoing track continues beneath the **A59**, now the lowest crossing of the Ribble. Carry on beside allotments to meet the main road. Turn left over Penwortham New Bridge, following the Ribble Way onto the river's northern bank.



In the middle of the 18th century a **bridge** was built at Penwortham to replace the ford and ferry which had until then been the only means of crossing the river this far downstream. The bridge collapsed after only four years but was succeeded in 1759 by a more substantial structure. That survived until 1912, when the present bridge was constructed to meet the demands of a new vehicle on the roads – the motor car.

PRESTON'S SKYLINE

Throughout the stage, Preston's buildings command the horizon. Gone are the tall chimneys of the mills and engineering factories on which the prosperity of the city once relied, and in their place rise the tower blocks of commercial enterprise and housing. Another relative newcomer breaking the skyline is the latticework stadium of Preston's football team, North End. Preston North End was a founder member of the Football League and is one of the few clubs in the country still playing on its original ground.

Some outlines that would have been familiar to travellers passing this way a century ago remain, perhaps the most prominent being the white spire of St Walburghe's Catholic Church.

St Walburghe's spire was designed by John Hansom, the same man who gave us the Hansom cab. Soaring to 309ft (94m), it is the third highest in the country and was built by the Jesuits between 1850 and 1854. Although the church is of dun-coloured sandstone, the towering landmark spire stands separate from the church and is of a contrasting white limestone that shines in the sun. It is said that much of the stone for its construction was bought second-hand from the railway companies as they replaced the stone sleepers supporting the track with wood.

Day walkers

With a lack of rural routes through the conurbation, the short alternative to retracing your steps along the Ribble Way is a 4 mile (6.4km) walk back to Longton, mainly along busy main roads. Another option is to use public transport, parking at Preston in the morning and catching a bus to start the walk from the Golden Ball at Longton.

PENWORTHAM

The historic old town of Penwortham sits on top of a prominent hill rising above the Ribble's southern bank. It developed around a motte and bailey castle that overlooked an ancient fording place. The Romans appreciated the strategic importance of the site and were the first to establish a fort here, a commanding position that remained in use throughout the Saxon period. After the Conquest, the Normans, too, established a base, and Penwortham was one of the few places in Lancashire to be mentioned in the Domesday Book at a time when the area was largely considered an unproductive wasteland.

In 1075 Benedictine monks founded a priory, and it was probably they who first began draining the surrounding marshes to create farmland. The priory has long since disappeared, and all that remains of the castle is the earth mound.

The oldest building still standing in Penwortham is the 15th-century church, whose square tower can be seen through the trees upon the hill. Tradition holds that there has been a church on the site since AD644, a not improbable claim given the significance of Penwortham during those early times, when travel across the sea to Celtic Ireland would have been a less daunting prospect than an overland journey to York or Canterbury.



- the Ribble Way (72 miles) described in 7 stages with variants included for day walkers • estuary marshes, quiet countryside, attractive villages and the wild Yorkshire fells

The 72-mile Ribble Way traces the full length of the Ribble valley and leads walkers through some of the finest scenery in northwest England. The route is described from the Lancashire village of Longton, near the estuary mouth, to the source of the Ribble, high on Cam Fell in the Yorkshire Dales. Although not always by the river, the valley route winds through some beautiful countryside, alternating between fields, quiet tracks, lanes and wooded cloughs, with enticing views to the surrounding hills of Pendle, Bowland and the western Dales.

- the route can be walked year-round, within a week
- includes a route summary table, maps, and highly-detailed



information on points of interest and historical features along the route

- start and finish points easily accessible by public transport

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