

Planning and preparation

From the red stone village of Melrose, the Way heads straight up to the 300m contour on the volcanic Eildons. After a half-day along the great River Tweed, it strikes south-east across pastureland and through small woods; first along the line of Roman Dere Street, then climbing gradually through more hilly grassland.

After Morebattle the going gets steeper. You'll climb to well above 300m (1000ft) on Wideopen Hill, and (having now entered England) return to this height across the shapely foothills and heather moors of the Cheviots. From Wooler, lower moorland mixed with arable fields and forestry plantation lead you out to sea. The final crossing to Lindisfarne is made by road causeway or, more adventurously, on the ancient Pilgrims' Path across 2.5 miles (4km) of tidal mud.

Through all this variety, the going underfoot is, on the whole, gentle. Here are no bogs, heather-bashing or harsh, stony paths. After the first climb from Melrose, the slopes are neither steep nor unduly long and the Way never ventures above 370m (1210ft). Over the 62 miles (100km), your total ascent is a modest 2250m (7380ft) – increasing to 2750m (9020ft) if you take the ambitious Cheviot option. But because so many paths are grassy, the route does require some care in navigation compared with more frequented, well-worn footpaths.

The Way is normally walked eastwards, from Melrose to Lindisfarne, echoing the progression of St Cuthbert's life: see page 17. On a practical note, wet weather usually arrives from the south-west, so it's more likely to be at your back. More important, this direction makes Lindisfarne the culmination of your walk.

Best time of year and weather

The Way can be walked enjoyably at any time between March and October. The wildflowers are at their best in May and June, and the weather tends to be kind. May to July is the nesting season for sea-birds of Lindisfarne and the Farne Islands. July and August are holiday months, with Scottish schools breaking for the summer at the start of July. The Way, though never crowded, will be at its busiest in those two months. They also have hazy summer light and some inconvenience from biting insects, so are not ideal. Autumn colours are at their finest in late October, and autumn brings thousands of wading birds to Lindisfarne.

If you are an experienced walker and don't mind a bit of cold and wet, you could walk the Way in mid-winter. Expect eight hours of daylight (or even less), some very muddy paths and a shortage of accommodation. When the sun does come out, winter light over the hills and sea can be magical.

On average, the eastern side of the UK is drier and sunnier than the west. But British weather is seldom average. Expect at least some sunshine, and also some rain, on your walk. Continuous heavy rain all day long is rare, but not unknown.

Previous experience

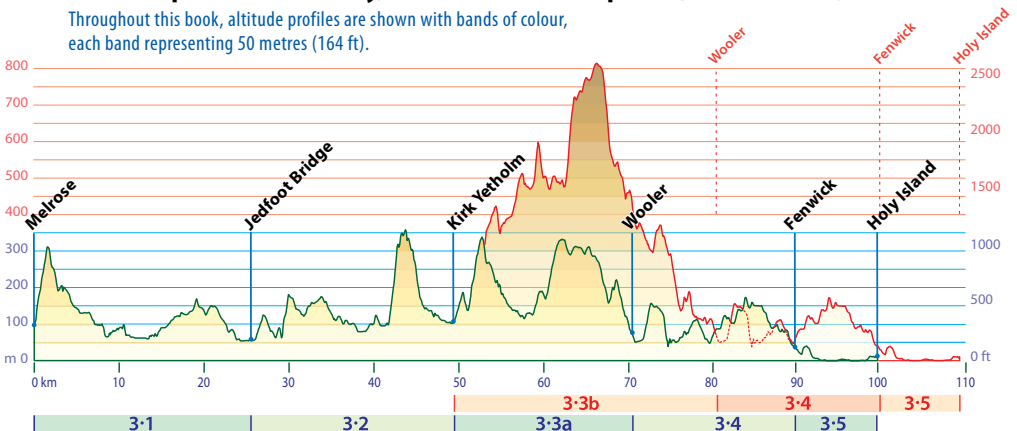
If you've never tackled a long-distance walk before, don't worry: St Cuthbert's Way is an ideal choice. The distances between accommodation points are modest; the terrain mostly has sound surfaces; the gradients are fairly steady with only the odd rough, boggy or steep section; and the waymarking is mostly very good, although there are places where you need to be alert.

Sound preparation and planning will help you to enjoy the experience to the full. Inexperienced walkers may find it more enjoyable, as well as safer, to have company. Ideally go with somebody who can use a map and compass, or even attach yourself to an organised group. Note that the Cheviot option is considerably more demanding, both physically and in terms of navigation, than the main Way. It uses unmarked paths over high hills which are exposed to bad weather and hill fog: see pages 48-51.

Book your accommodation well in advance and be realistic in committing yourself to daily distances. Well in advance, do several all-day walks, if possible on consecutive days, to test your footwear, waterproofs and fitness. Obtain our *Notes for novices* which cover choosing and buying gear: see page 62

Altitude profile of the Way, with the Cheviot option (shown in red)

Throughout this book, altitude profiles are shown with bands of colour, each band representing 50 metres (164 ft).



How long will it take?

A strong, fit walker in a hurry could snatch the route in a 3-day long weekend – though getting home from Lindisfarne may add to that. But making a proper holiday of it over five or six days allows time to visit at least one of the ruined abbeys, to explore Melrose and Wooler, and especially to linger on Lindisfarne.

The table presents the distances for a five-day walk. You can add rest days and split the longer days further: see the facilities table. But if you want to extend the actual walking over more than six days, then you'll be dependent on places with a single B&B, which may be full – notably Hethpool, where in 2009 Hethpool House was the only accommodation between Kirk Yetholm and Wooler.

To this you must add time for Holy Island itself. Access across the causeway is possible only during two 8-hour periods in any 24 hours, depending on the tides. The Pilgrims' Path is even more limited: see page 11. Rather than hurrying on and off the island on a single tide, it's better to linger overnight. The tourist tide retreats as the sea advances, making Lindisfarne into a proper island. The sea and the seals approach the shoreline, and evening light plays on the castle walls.

However, accommodation on the island is not of the cheapest, and camping is not allowed. So some may prefer to spend a daytime high tide on the island, before an overnight at Beal or Fenwick, convenient for a morning bus.

Table 1: Distances and overnight stops (5-day walk)

	miles	km
3-1 Melrose	16	26
3-2 Jedfoot Bridge	15	24
3-3a* Kirk Yetholm	13	21
Wooler		
3-3b *extra via Cheviot option	+5	+8
3-4 Fenwick	12	19½
3-5 Holy Island	6	9½
Total	62 (67)	100 (108)

Table 2: Facilities along the Way

section	place	distance offroute	B&Bs etc.	camping	shop	pub, café
	Galashiels	4½mi 7km	✓		✓	✓
3-1	Melrose		✓	✓	✓	✓
3-1	Newtown St Boswells		✓		✓	✓
3-1	St Boswells		✓		✓	✓
3-1	Ancrum	½mi 1km	✓		✓	✓
3-1	Harestanes/Monteviot				✓	✓
3-2	Jedfoot Bridge		✓			
3-2	Jedburgh	2½mi 4km	✓	✓	✓	✓
3-2	Morebattle		✓		✓	✓
3-2	Town Yetholm		✓	✓	✓	✓
3-3	Kirk Yetholm		✓			✓
3-3a	Hethpool		✓			
3-3b	Earle		✓			
3-4	Wooler		✓	✓	✓	✓
3-4	East Horton		✓			
3-4	Hazelrigg		✓			
3-5	Fenwick		✓			
3-5	West Kylee	1mi 1-6km	✓	✓		
3-5	Beal	1½mi 2½km	✓		✓	✓
3-5	Holy Island village		✓		✓	✓

It's also worth spending time in Melrose at the start. At St Boswells, note that Dryburgh Abbey is not visible from the Way: the short diversion across the river Tweed takes an extra hour or so to visit it. A half-day could also be spent in Jedburgh with its abbey, castle, and royal house.

Two further diversions are offered for convenience rather than scenery. At the start of the walk, Galashiels has more accommodation options and slightly better transport links. Rather than wait an hour for a connecting bus to Melrose, you may prefer to walk the 7km as a preamble: see page 28. And 26km into the walk, many will prefer to hike the 4km to Jedburgh's shops, pubs and abbey, rather than arrange a taxi from Harestanes Visitor Centre or take a bus from Ancrum: see page 36.

The final option, for the adventurous, is the mountain route over the Cheviot. At 815m (2674ft) this is the summit of the Cheviot range, and of Eastern England. The ascent from Yetholm, waymarked as part of the Pennine Way, is on a grassy path. The descent is on peaty heather paths and 4x4 tracks. If overnighting at Yetholm, you can postpone your final decision about this option until the morning's weather forecast. The hilltop route is slightly longer, and much more strenuous (450m more ascent) than the Way itself, and it takes about 3 hours longer.

Accommodation and supplies

Accommodation along the way is adequate, but not abundant. You are strongly advised to book in advance, even in the off season. A fishing party or school can fill up a whole village!

There are youth hostels at Melrose, Kirk Yetholm, and Wooler. Elsewhere there are inexpensive country inns and B&Bs. And for the truly economical on the high-level route, there is an open shelter at Auchope Cairn, high on the slopes of The Cheviot.

Railway Inn, Newtown St Boswells

