

Foreword

I would like to have had this book years ago, when I would have been able to make practical use of it to walk the Borders Abbeys Way. It is aimed primarily at walkers, and gives them necessary and detailed information, and good advice as to what they should do and what they would be wise to avoid. But it offers more than that. It is also a guide to the social and cultural history of the Borderland, to the past as well as the present.

The four ruined abbeys – Melrose, Dryburgh, Kelso and Jedburgh – are at the heart of the route. But it goes further, inviting you to Hawick where there has never been an abbey, and to Selkirk where the abbey survived for only a few years in the 12th century before the monks decamped to Kelso, with its richer pastureland for their sheep. Indeed it offers an outline history of the Borders from the generally peaceful and prosperous reign of King David I, the founder of the abbeys, through the ravages of English invasions, the rough reiving centuries, and the flourishing of the Borders in the 18th century Enlightenment.

In short, it's a book to be read for pleasure as well as use. Even those of us who think we know the Borders may be reminded of things we had forgotten – in my case The Temple of the Muses commemorating the poet James Thomson. Newcomers to the Borders will find this book a splendid introduction to its history, legends and wildlife.

Allan Massie, author and journalist



1 Planning and preparation

The Borders Abbeys Way is a very pleasing walk for experienced walkers and beginners alike. It is an easygoing circuit of 67 miles (108 km), often started and finished in the pretty market town of Melrose, one of the most visited and accessible towns of the Borders. Melrose is only about 40 miles (65 km) south of Edinburgh, reached easily by train, bus or car. The route has modest ascents and descents, and is waymarked clearly and consistently. The Way was developed by Scottish Borders Council, which also maintains it, and the route was completed in 2006. It has been recognised as one of Scotland's Great Trails.

Named after the famous 12th century abbeys that the Way visits, your walk circumnavigates the central Borders using ancient drove roads and paths, through an area of picturesque scenery, diverse wildlife, unique history and welcoming hospitality. The Way is a circuit, more oval than circular. It can be started at any of the five main towns – Melrose, Kelso, Jedburgh, Hawick or Selkirk. It can be completed in five days with an overnight stopover at each, or six days if (as recommended) you split the long Melrose/Kelso section into two with an overnight in St Boswells.


Part 3 provides a detailed route description for following the Way clockwise, the direction generally agreed to provide the best views. Although we start and finish at Melrose, you can follow our sections in any order. If you live within striking range, you may wish to complete the Way in a couple of long weekends or even day walks, using local buses to return to your starting points.


River Teviot near Nisbet





Best time of year and weather


Fortunately for those who have little choice over their holiday dates, any time of year can be suitable, although winter months have predictable disadvantages. Scotland can have cold wet weather at any time of the year, or, if you are lucky, crisp dry days filled with sunshine. Think about the following before making plans:


 Winter walking is less flexible: at this latitude, the days are short, in late December as few as 6-7 hours of daylight as opposed to 16-18 hours in late June.

 Weather at any time of the year can be changeable: see page 69 for sources of weather forecasts.

 Public transport in winter months can be less frequent, therefore plan your walk accordingly. Local transport operator websites are on page 68.

 Many visitor attractions are closed out of season (typically October to April).

 Summer months may bring pests such as midges (small biting insects) and/or clegs (horse-flies), although usually only in still weather.

 Accommodation in summer months can be under pressure when visitor numbers are high; in winter some B&Bs close.

Ideally if you can choose your holiday dates, the optimum months are likely to be May/June and early September/October. Also bear in mind the Borders Common Riding festivals dates: see page 13. Peak summer months are July/ August, with demand high for accommodation. Always book accommodation well in advance.

How long will it take?

The Way can be completed by fast walkers in five days, at the price of a very long first day and no time to make side-trips. For most people it makes more sense to allow six walking days. How you complete the Way depends not only your fitness and attitude, but also on your time constraints and the pace you find comfortable. Don't underestimate the time you need to appreciate fine scenery and look out for wildlife.

Towards the Minto hills



Allow time to explore the towns *en route* and especially the abbeys, which generally open at 9.30 or 10.00 depending on the season. Each abbey visit needs about an hour, and in some you will want to linger longer, e.g. to climb to the roof or visit a museum. The table opposite shows the daily distances for two itineraries.

If the first day's distance of 17.9 miles (28.8 km) feels too long, you can shorten your first day's walk from Melrose, stopping to take a leisurely visit at Dryburgh Abbey 4 miles (6.4 km) from

Melrose, and going slightly off-route to overnight at nearby St Boswells. If you then retrace your steps to Dryburgh, the next day's walk would be 15 miles/24.2 km to Kelso, but if you stay south of the Tweed on St Cuthbert's Way, you can rejoin the Borders Abbeys Way after only 2 miles/3 km at Mertoun Bridge, shortening the second day's distance to 13.7 mi/22.1 km.

Other options include the Eildon Hill North route out of Melrose. This adds only 0.6 miles (1 km) to your journey, but it includes a stiff climb to 404 m/1325 ft, which allows you to enjoy superb views from the Eildons. It combines well with a detour to Dryburgh Abbey and overnight in St Boswells on our six-day itinerary. Finally, if you take the drove road option out of Hawick, you will add 2.1 miles (3.4 km) to your day's walk.

If completing the Way as a single expedition seems too challenging, splitting the circuit into shorter sections is a further option. There are many ways to divide it into manageable sections, using public transport to return to your starting point.

Distances

		Five-day walk		Six-day walk		
		miles	km	miles	km	pages
Melrose		17.9	28.8	4.7	7.6	29-33
				15.0	24.2	33-37
Kelso		13.0	20.9	13.0	20.9	38-44
Jedburgh		13.2	21.3	13.2	21.3	45-52
Hawick		12.8	20.6	12.8	20.6	53-61
Selkirk		10.5	16.9	10.5	16.9	62-67
Melrose						
Total		67.4	108.5	69.2	111.5	



Terrain and gradients

The Way is fairly well used, and paths across even grassy ground may be well-trampled. The terrain is mixed, ranging from minor roads, good tracks on farm and forest roads, to field and riverside paths which may have muddy or boggy sections, depending on recent weather conditions. Where there are streams to cross, timber footbridges are provided. Access through fences and walls is generally by gate, although there are occasional stiles to climb.

There are hillside sections where lighter use makes the paths less obvious, but waymarkers provide reassurance. These stretches can feel exposed and remote, and must be taken seriously, especially when weather conditions are poor and visibility is compromised. Always check the weather forecast before setting out: sources are listed on page 69.

The Way generally features many minor rises and falls through gentle rolling countryside, and the main Way never goes above 338 m (1110 ft) above sea level. There are also some notable climbs, and in order to complete the whole route you will gain a total of 1625 m (5330 ft) of altitude.

The altitude profile on the inside back cover shows ascents and descents along the Way, assuming you start from Melrose and stick to the main Way. Studying the profile can help you to plan your preferred itinerary.



Waymarking and navigation

The Way is waymarked clearly and consistently along its entire length with distinctive Borders Abbeys Way waymarkers, either on timber posts or attached to walls or lamp-posts. At major junctions, timber fingerposts with inscribed lettering are often prominent from a distance. Other than in low cloud or thick mist, waymarkers are generally intervisible even across high ground. However, remember that waymarkers can occasionally become overgrown with vegetation or damaged by animals or people.



If you have never tackled a long-distance walk before, the Way is a good first choice; you may benefit from reading our *Notes for novices*: see page 69. Inexperienced walkers may find it more enjoyable, as well as safer, to have company, ideally someone who can read a map and compass. However, it is generally when you make decisions for yourself that you learn to navigate.

The Eildon Hill North alternative from Melrose is waymarked as the St Cuthbert Way/ Eildon Hill Walk as far as the saddle of the Eildon Hills, thereafter follow our directions carefully to Eildon Mains. The alternative Waverley Walk approach into Hawick is not waymarked, but follows a well-surfaced route. The drove road option out of Hawick is not waymarked at first, and some of its waymarks (white horseshoe on blue) are very faded. Again, follow our directions closely until you rejoin the Borders Abbeys Way.

On minor and single-track roads stay alert for other road users. If there are no pavements or verges, walk on the right side of the road so as to face oncoming traffic. The only exception is where poor sight lines temporarily make it safer to use the left side. Drivers may not be expecting to see walkers: help them by wearing bright colours, especially when visibility is poor.

The mapping in this book is all you need to follow the Way, although it's advisable to read about the route ahead in advance. Study the route description and maps for an idea of where you *should* be going. Carrying a compass is also sensible, provided that you know how to use it. Smart mobile phones have an accurate compass and many walking and mapping apps are available. For more about maps, printed and online, see page 69.

