

Introduction

Study St Cuthbert's Way on the map, and you may expect a slightly tame walk with a tendency to stay at or below the 300 m contour, a selection of Border abbeys, a stretch of the Tweed and a final section apparently underwater.

What the map doesn't prepare you for is the sheer charm of this comparatively short path. Its hills may be small, but they are certainly hilly: from the volcanic knobs of the Eildons clothed in lurid gorse and inhabited by the Queen of Elfland herself to the shapely foothills of the Cheviots, each one cloaked with steep grass and crowned with a hill fort.

Then there are the small woods, some of open pine, some scrubby, some verging on jungle. There are the countless streams, where wild garlic shines among the brown gloom. Even the short road section surprised me: north-east of Wooler a dead rabbit slid along the tarmac, apparently self-propelled, but actually pulled by a considerably smaller stoat.

There's much to enjoy along the Way, but even so, you'll be glad when it's over – glad because you've arrived at Lindisfarne. The 'underwater' section across the mudflats of the Pilgrims' Path is unique in British long-distance walking. And the Holy Island of Lindisfarne is one of the country's most magical places. Many come to St Cuthbert's Way because it is quite short. Many will finish this charming path wishing it were a whole lot longer.

Above Melrose, path onto the Eildons



Planning and preparation

From the red stone village of Melrose, the Way heads straight up to 310 m (1020 ft) 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 369 m (1210 ft) on Wideopen Hill, and (after crossing the border into England) return to nearly 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 the sea. The final crossing to Lindisfarne is made by road causeway or, more adventurously, barefoot on the ancient Pilgrim Way across 2.5 miles (4 km) of tidal mud and sand.

Through all this variety, the going underfoot is, on the whole, gentle. After the first climb from Melrose, the slopes are neither steep nor unduly long and the Way never ventures above 370 m. Over the 63 miles (101 km), your total ascent is a modest 2250 m (7400 ff): see pages 12-13 for an altitude profile of the whole route. But because many of its paths are grassy, the Way 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, prevailing winds are usually from the south-west, so are more likely to be at your back.

Moreover, this direction makes the Holy Island of Lindisfarne the fitting 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 seabirds 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 may not be 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 fewer than eight hours of daylight in December, 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 the weather in Britain 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. Low cloud or sea fog (*haar*) can make navigation challenging, so make sure that your map-and-compass skills are adequate before you set off.

Previous experience

If you've never tackled a long-distance walk before, don't worry: St Cuthbert's Way makes a good choice. The distances between accommodations are not excessive; the terrain mostly has sound surfaces; the gradients are steady with only the odd rough, boggy or steep section; and the waymarking is mostly good, although there are places where you need to stay alert, especially if visibility is poor.

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 perhaps attach yourself to an organised group. Book your accommodation well in advance and be realistic in committing yourself to daily distances. In the weeks before, do several all-day walks, if possible on consecutive days, to test your footwear, waterproofs and fitness. Obtain our *Notes for novices* which cover distance planning and choosing walking equipment: see page 71.

How long will it take?

A strong, fit walker in a hurry could snatch the route in a 3-day long weekend – though tidal restrictions at Lindisfarne would probably add a fourth day. 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 to linger on Lindisfarne.

Table 1 presents the distances for a five-day walk. You can add rest days and perhaps split the longer days. If you want to extend the mainland walking over more than five days, you can consider overnighting at any or all of St Boswells, Morebattle and Hethpool. However, you'd be relying on places that have only a single B&B which may be fully booked on the dates that you need, or may have gone over to self-catering by the time you read this. Refer to the facilities table on page 12 for more detail.

Beyond the mainland walk, you must add time for Holy Island itself. You can cross the causeway safely only during two periods in any 24 hours, depending on the tides. The duration of the 'safe periods' varies from just over five hours (at extreme spring tides) to nine (at extreme neaps), so it's worth checking your exact dates ahead of time: see bit.ly/RR-causeway. The Pilgrim Way is lower lying so its safe periods are even shorter. But the barefoot approach over the sands and mudflats is a unique experience – well worth researching the tide times and read page 11 carefully.

Rather than hurrying on and off the island on a single tide, it's much better to linger overnight if possible. 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 expensive, 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 possible daily distances

	<i>miles</i>	<i>km</i>	<i>pages</i>
Melrose			
3-1	14-2	22-8	31-37
Harestanes			
3-2	17-3	27-8	40-47
Kirk Yetholm			
3-3	13-3	21-4	48-56
Wooler			
3-4	11-9	19-1	58-63
Fenwick			
3-5	5-9	9-5	64-66
Holy Island			
<i>Total</i>	<i>62-6</i>	<i>100-7</i>	

When planning how much time to spend on the Way, remember that you may enjoy some leisure in various places, especially those with ruined abbeys. If you haven't been to Melrose before, you may want to spend a day or half-day there before embarking on the Way: see page 30. At St Boswells, note that to see Dryburgh Abbey you need an extra hour or so for the detour across the river Tweed. You may also want to spend time in Jedburgh to visit its abbey, castle, and royal house. And you may well want to dwell on Lindisfarne for a night or two: see page 67.

You are bound to walk much further than the 63 miles in the course of getting to and from the route from your accommodations and evening meals. There are many attractive detours to see abbeys or castles and you may want to climb the odd hill for a better view. Although the Borders Railway gives convenient access from Edinburgh to Tweedbank, that still leaves you with a two-mile walk (or bus ride) to Melrose itself. And given that the centre of Jedburgh is between 2.2 and 3 miles offroute (depending on where you leave the Way) you will understand why many tour operators arrange a taxi for their walkers from Harestanes which is near mile 14.2. (Options for resuming the route from Jedburgh are discussed on page 39.)

If you walked from Tweedbank to Melrose, you will have covered 16.2 miles (26.1 km) to Harestanes on your first day, which will be enough for many. If that sounds too much for you, you could split the first day at Newtown St Boswells. You could also split other sections: see the previous page. But note that if you taxi back to Harestanes the next day, you face a 17.3-mile walk to Kirk Yetholm, which may be too long for many.

Eildons and River Tweed from Scott's View



Accommodation and supplies

Table 2

	B&B/hotel	hostel	camping	shop	pub/café
Melrose	✓		✓	✓	✓
<i>Newton St Boswells</i>	✓			✓	✓
<i>St Boswells</i>	✓				✓
<i>Jedfoot Bridge/Mounthooly</i>					✓
<i>Harestanes/Monteviot</i>					✓
<i>Jedburgh (2.5 mi/4 km)</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
<i>Morebattle</i>	✓			✓	✓
<i>Town Yetholm</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
<i>Kirk Yetholm</i>	✓	✓			✓
<i>Hethpool</i>	✓				
<i>Wooler</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>East Horton</i>	✓				
<i>Fenwick</i>	✓				✓
<i>Beal (1.5 mi/2 km)</i>			✓		✓
<i>Holy Island Village</i>	✓			✓	✓
<i>Beal Road End</i>	✓			✓	✓

Places in *italics* had only one B&B as of 2023

✓ Refer to page 44 for the Templehall Hotel

Accommodation along the Way can be sparse, and you need to book in advance at any time of year. Some B&Bs that closed during the Covid pandemic reopened only as self-catering, and others never reopened. All facilities are on or close to the Way unless we show a distance offroute: that is measured from the closest approach to the Way. Table 2 uses italics to distinguish places where in 2023 we knew of only one B&B, often with very limited capacity: a fishing party or small group can fill up an entire village. Bear in mind also that B&B hosts don't normally provide evening meals: if you stay in a rural village you may have a choice between carrying enough food to eat cold as an evening meal, or taking taxis both ways to the nearest town with a pub or restaurant. And some hosts insist on a two-night minimum stay, especially in high season, so consider whether you want a rest day at that location,

The only hostels close to the Way are at Kirk Yetholm and Wooler, open in season. Elsewhere there are country inns and B&Bs which may be quite expensive: in early 2023 £60-£90 per night was a typical *minimum* for a solo walker in each location. Many B&Bs charge virtually the same for a solo walker as for two people sharing – despite the fact that you'll get only one breakfast! Hotels and inns are more likely to have single rooms, so it's worth shopping around. If you are making your own accommodation bookings, be sure to contact the smaller locations first: once those challenges are met, email or phone the places with more choice, such as Melrose and Wooler. Alternatively, use the services of one of the companies that specialise in support services for walkers on this route: see page 71. If you want to bring more stuff with you that you are prepared to carry in your rucksack, you will need their help anyway. Read our packing list on page 16 before deciding.

There are several campsites along the Way. Discreet and responsible wild camping is a legal right in Scotland: see page 13. In England it isn't, not even on the access land defined by the *Countryside and Rights of Way Act*.

The Way remains at fairly low altitude throughout, and there is little if any drinkable water to be found. So refill your water bottle or bladder at every opportunity: most cafés and pubs will oblige a genuine customer. Shops for food supplies are sparse in places. Between St Boswells and Town Yetholm you pass only one shop, the community store at Morebattle: visit morebattlecommunityshop.co.uk to check its opening times. There's no food and drink between Kirk Yetholm and Wooler, nor any between Wooler and Lindisfarne.

Getting there and away

Table 3 shows recommended journey options and times for travel. To reach Melrose from Edinburgh, use the Borders Railway to Tweedbank. Trains normally run twice an hour and take an hour; complete the final couple of miles into Melrose by bus or on foot: see page 28 for directions. You can also reach Melrose from Edinburgh using Borders Buses, but you have to change at Galashiels and it takes two hours or more.

To reach Melrose from Newcastle or anywhere to its south including London, the fastest method is an LNER train from London King's Cross to Berwick upon Tweed, with hourly departures and fast journey times. From Berwick take Borders Buses' number 60 or 67 to Melrose (departures are roughly hourly) or, if time is at a premium, a taxi (37 miles).

Table 3: Distances and journey times to the start and from the finish

from	to	mi	km	means of travel	time (fastest)
Edinburgh (Waverley) *	Melrose	40	63	train to Tweedbank	1hr
Edinburgh bus station *	Melrose	40	63	bus	2hrs
Newcastle upon Tyne *	Melrose via Berwick	100	161	train to Berwick, then bus	2hr 30min
Newcastle upon Tyne *	Melrose	72	116	bus (only 6 per week)	1hr 40min
Berwick-upon-Tweed	Melrose	37	60	bus	1hr 20min
Beal Filling Station ♦	Berwick-upon-Tweed	10	16	bus	21 min
Berwick-upon-Tweed	Edinburgh (Waverley)	57	92	train	41 min
Berwick-upon-Tweed	Newcastle upon Tyne	63	101	train	42 min
Beal Filling Station ♦	Newcastle upon Tyne	59	95	bus	2hrs 6min

* For travel from the nearest airport, add 40–60 minutes to each time: see text

♦ Travel times from Lindisfarne are longer, but vary with the tides: instead we show times from bus stops at Beal Filling Station (TD12 2PD)

