

# Hadrian's Cycleway

NCN Route 72. South Shields to Ravenglass 174 miles



Having ducked out of Rachel's brother's Australian wedding on environmental and unsociable grounds, I was at a loss as to what to do with myself for a week in June.

Having never taken a holiday on my own before, it seemed a good opportunity to test my metal with a solo expedition, but what? My first thought was Coast to Coast on foot, supposedly far superior to the Pennine Way, according to Wainwright anyway, and I already have the guidebook courtesy of a birthday. I soon worked out that I didn't have the time though, unless I set myself a punishing schedule, and it is a holiday after all.

OK, so if not on foot, coast to coast by bike? Surfing the Internet for ideas I discovered 'Sustrans', the UK's leading sustainable transport charity, so they say, whose vision is 'a world in which people choose to travel in ways that benefit their health and the environment.' All well and good, but all I want is some free route advice. While looking at their Sea to Sea route or C2C, as they prefer to call it, I found the Hadrian's Wall route, which immediately caught my interest. The majority of the route would be new territory to me, and also had an element of historical exploration thrown in. Seemed ideal. After spending some time checking out Sustrans' on-line mapping I eventually stumped up the money to buy their official map for £6.99, and having committed cash, I now had the impetus to plan my trip.

The route is usually ridden west to east as this takes advantage of the route profile, with short sharp ascents and long flowing down hill. East to west seemed logical to me though as I have spent so much time in The Lakes recently that it would be like cycling home, sort of. Also I could get a lift close to South Shields with Suma's Newcastle wagon on a Friday morning, saving on train fares and train hassle. Northern Rail let your bike

travel for free, but won't guarantee that they let you on with it. They have two bike spaces on each train and if they're full of bikes, or passengers, it's the conductor's discretion to let you travel. Probably be fine but you never know, so I booked myself a guaranteed one way gratis journey with the Newcastle driver who informed me that he set off at 4am and could drop me at Washington Services for 6am, nice.

Even better my Dad stepped in last minute, offering to run me up at a much more sociable time. Only as we were leaving Hebden Bridge did I realise he was heading for Ravenglass...

Day 1. South Shields to Ovingham 24 miles.

The route starts/ends at Arbeia Roman Fort, skilfully hidden at the centre of a housing estate in South Shields.

Arriving at lunchtime, our round-the-houses navigation was fortunate in passing Coleman's award winning Fish and Chip Shop, 'Famous for fish and chips since 1926'. Where my Dad extracted a fish supper from me to go with his Father's Day whisky - train next time I think.

The reconstructed Roman Gate House provides a nice backdrop for eating chips and also a nice backdrop for an 'off I go' photograph. So off I went. First time out with both panniers fully loaded. I'd previously biked to work with some of my camping gear, about 5kg, to get a feel for how much weight I could carry. Now I estimated that I had about 12kg over the rear wheel. I could feel the weight, but it felt OK. Like moving from my car to my camper, life took on a new speed. Steady away, watch your fuel consumption, and don't ride off the curb like that again or you'll bust your wheel.

Less than quarter of a mile down the road though and I'm waiting. Waiting for a passenger ferry to take me across the River Tyne. You can't beat a ride on a ferry to make you feel like you're really on holiday. £1.10 one-way, and I'm away again heading through North Shields and Wallsend on a purpose built, traffic free, route towards Newcastle. The route snakes around the former glories of shipbuilding, passing what's left of Harland and Wolff, before taking on a predictable urban feel as the tarmac glitters with broken glass and the walls are daubed with graffiti. Some of the glass looks to be deliberately targeted at cyclist with occasional bottles smashed in the centre of the path, and only a couple of miles into my trip I pick up a front puncture. Expecting to be bike-jacked by teen-hoodies at any moment, I swiftly repaired the damage, but was only accosted by fellow cyclist offering assistance and commiseration that 'shit happens.' Back on track again and I'm swiftly back to the banks of the River Tyne, and the upmarket Newcastle Quayside. Cycling past bars and restaurants, resisting the urge to stop so soon, and being unable to get the song 'Fog on the Tyne' out of my head. Gaza's version obviously as it's easier to sing.

The route follows the banks of the Tyne out of the City, through country parks and suburbia. It's only when I cross Wylam Railway Bridge, an impressive early example of a single span suspension bridge built in 1876, that I begin to appreciate the depth of industrial history I'm passing along the river. Maybe I should have stopped for a coffee on the quay to soak up the heritage, and tried my hand at busking.

Onwards to Ovingham and its precarious looking twin steel bridges, where I had planned my first night's stay. 'That'll be just ten pounds for the night then' says Mr Campsite owner. I bite my tongue to suppress the Yorkshire war cry.

Day 2 Ovingham to Haltwistle 33 miles +6 miles

Pleasant night in Ovingham despite watching England play Algeria. Switched pubs at half time to see if it would improve the situation but to no avail.

Back in the saddle for 8.00am and it's off to the hills in search of the Romans, or what's left of them.

Hadrian's Wall was a Roman frontier built in the years AD 122-30 by order of the Emperor Hadrian. It was 73 miles long and ran from Wallsend-on-Tyne in the east to Bowness on the Solway Firth in the west. The whole 150-mile from South Shields to Ravenglass was made an UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987, and what remains of the wall is now strategically occupied by English Heritage, a government organisation that practices highway robbery on unsuspecting tourists.

The cycle route continues to follow the River Tyne on quiet back roads. Taking you through the centre of historic villages and small towns along the way. Notably Corbridge with its 14<sup>th</sup> century Vicar's Pele Tower, built from the remains of the nearby Roman town of Corstopitum.

At Hexham the Tyne splits into two tributaries, the River North Tyne and River South Tyne and the route climbs steadily through the dramatic and wild countryside of the Northumberland National Park to its highest point at 300 meters, where Roman forts and views of the North Pennines are plentiful. A short diversion up Route 68 takes you to Steel Rigg, probably the most photographed section of the wall.

The cycle route is very well sign posted, every time I hesitated that I might have gone astray, a reassuring blue sticker, or pointer, would confirm that I was on the right track, leaving my map redundant and stowed away. So imagine my surprise when after a particularly steep hill I was greeted with a familiar looking view of Vindolanda Roman Fort, and then a very familiar junction where I had eaten a sandwich earlier. Some local wag had subtly move an arrow directing the unsuspecting travel in a perpetual loop. No harm done though, as I couldn't be certain that the old man grinning from his armchair window was responsible. I gave him the benefit of the doubt, and had to admit it was quite amusing.

Back on track through Haltwistle and on to my next planned stop at Greenhead, where the small campsite- 'lovingly cared for by an old lady living in a static caravan'- according to reviews on ukcampsite.co.uk. Was- 'now closed'. Bugger! Back on the bike to Haltwistle.

#### Day 3 Haltwistle to Port Carlisle 41 miles

Slight frost overnight and a glorious sunny morning, Yesterday had started with occasional light drizzle, and then slowly grown into a real flag cracker of a day, today looked set to be top cycling weather.

A short climb back up to Greenhead, and on to Birdoswald Roman Fort, which for me was the most enjoyable part of the wall. The road runs parallel to a section of wall interspersed with Turrets and magnificent views south over the Pennines.

Rounding a bend I came across Lanercost Priory, founded in 1169 as an Augustinian monastery, and despite being "dissolved" by Henry VIII in 1536, parts of the original foundation survive and are in use to this day. Parking my bike up, I was able to gain access to the churchyard and then on round the back of the monastery on a public footpath. It was only as I was leaving the church that I was accosted by English Heritage. A very pleasant, but persistent, woman who was opening up for the day, clearly believed that if she talked to me for long enough she could persuade me to part with £44.00 for annual membership- she was very wrong.

Back in the saddle and it's off to Carlisle, leaving the Pennine Hills behind. At various junctions I was met with a repeated 'Carlisle 7 miles', before a 'Carlisle 9 miles' as the route winds its way through picturesque villages in a dog-legged determination to avoid the main roads into the city. Through the centre itself the route is traffic free, and you have to admire the ingenuity of the route planner- park, back-ally, pedestrian street, car park, river bank. Some of it a bit rough and ready, but Sustrans are continually working on developing the route and negotiating improved access.

West of Carlisle I'm cruising down to the Solway Coast, and my next overnight at Port Carlisle.

Five pounds to camp in a field of buttercups, a free cold shower, and a half-pint of full fat milk from the farmer's wife. I feel like I've stepped back in time, it's all a bit Famous Five.

The locals are making full use of the National Cycle Network by cycling 18 miles of the coast in fancy dress, stopping off at every pub on the way, not a helmet in sight. A scarecrow on a butcher's bike particularly impressed me. Late into the evening I can still hear the occasional, giggling, cyclist meandering down the lane.

#### Day 4 Port Carlisle to Ravenglass 76 Miles

The Solway Firth is the third largest estuary in the UK, and has been recognised as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty since 1964, a nature reserve of mud flats, sand dunes, and salt marsh, with distant views across to Scotland. The tide comes in and out with remarkable speed, and every four weeks the high tide floods parts of the coast road.

Fortunately it isn't high tide and I don't have to short cut this dramatic section of coastline.

Passing through Bowness-on-Solway, the western end of Hadrian's Wall, the route is flat and fast and I have to reign in my enthusiasms. I've planned to ride the best part of eighty miles today, which is further than I've ridden before, and I don't want to run out of steam.

Sunday afternoon the coast road was comparatively busy with weekend sightseers bombing along. Monday morning it was just me, the school bus, and the odd farmer. (Odd as in more than one of them- although one of them had daubed 'Vote BNP' on his gate.)

Early morning I rolled into Silloth, a small town, noted for its glorious sea views and sunsets painted by Turner. I had originally planned to stay at Silloth but was put off by The Batman who said it was 'an odd place', (odd as in strange), but I found it pleasant enough on a Monday morning.

Cracking on south, I hadn't previously appreciated how populated this stretch of coast is, a mix of forgotten seaside towns, and industry, stretch down through Maryport, Workington, and Whitehaven. Thankfully avoiding the main road the cycleway provides a green transport network linking some interesting housing estates, seasonally decorated for the Word Cup with enough George's Crosses to put East Belfast to shame. Sadly no one had painted a mural of Wayne Rooney on their gable end which would have been a nice finishing touch.

Along pretty Whitehaven quayside the route then heads back inland through villages decorated with window boxes and the occasional flag before returning to the coast at Sellafield.

Approaching the end of the line at Ravenglass I'm expecting to cruise into the village down the main road. The route though unexpectedly takes me out through the dunes and onto an adventurous little path of rubber matting along the edge of the bay, where stunning views of Ravenglass in the evening light draw me down to the finish at the Roman Bath House.

A fitting finally to a very enjoyable route.

#### Day 5 Ravenglass...

Only one thing for it, as Freddie Mercury once said 'get on your bike and ride,' Hardknott here I come...

