

An Alternative Coast to Coast Route, the “Head to Head” Walk

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In 1973 Alfred Wainwright committed his then innovative “Coast to Coast walk” to print. Since that time it has justifiably enjoyed immense popularity, covering, as it does, sections of the three great northern National parks. In the introduction to his guide there is however a significant and thought provoking comment:

“....I want to encourage in others the ambition to devise, with the aid of maps, their own cross country marathons and not be merely followers of other peoples routes : there is no end to the possibilities for originality and initiative”

This was an irresistible challenge, but how and where to start and finish? Could I in fact improve on or even equal AW’s route choice and how could such a route be devised. Of course we now benefit from the immediacy of digital mapping and the recent legislation over open access has created a myriad of further possibilities. Mundanely, it’s still probably easiest to start with a small scale map, in this case the OS Northern England Travel Map, and start drawing some lines!

Home being in Cumbria there was no real alternative to the geographical prominence of St Bees Head as a finishing point, though Ravenglass, with its lovely finish over Muncaster Fell, certainly ran it very close. Not only would this be a nod towards AW’s original route but it opened up the possibility of a stirring finale over Pillar and the ridge leading down into West Cumbria. As a starting point on the east coast, Flamborough Head seemed to fulfil all the necessary criteria. Again it was geographically prominent; the cliffs, though of chalk were as equally renowned as the red sandstone of St Bees, especially in the populations of sea birds. Lastly both locations have an all important symbolic lighthouse. During my research, however, another bizarre commonality came to light.

In April 1778, at the height of the American revolutionary war, the American privateer “Ranger” commanded by John Paul Jones raided the port of Whitehaven, four miles to the north of St Bees Head. Little damage was done to shipping in the busy port thanks in part to incessant rain, as well as to the local fire volunteers. However, as a consolation perhaps, some of the raiding party did “make very free with the liquors in Alison’s Public House on the old quay”! Retreating to his French base, Jones carried on his raids around the British coastline, the end of September 1779 finding him with a small squadron of ships north of the Humber estuary. Encountering a British convoy, a battle ensued with the outnumbered convoy escorts, resulting in the sinking of Jones’

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flagship, but the eventual surrender and capture of the British ships. Jones retreated in triumph to Holland and then France following his greatest victory which became known as "The Battle off Flamborough Head".

So, Flamborough Head to St Bees Head it was to be, nicely symmetrical but what of the route? A more detailed examination of the terrain, firstly with digital mapping, raised the intriguing possibility of joining as many "Ways" together as practical. Pre-eminent amongst those on the line of walk were the Wolds Way, the Nidderdale Way and the Dales Way, though there could also be contributions from a number of others, even including a short stretch of the Pennine Way approaching Pen-y-ghent. Mileage seemed to be coming out around the 210 mile mark, with a total height climb somewhat greater than 25,000 feet. Turning to larger scale "Explorer" maps an interesting route choice seemed feasible, though I would not be fully aware of the terrain until it was underfoot. With no opportunity to make a "recce", changes to the route would just have to be made on the fly!

If the first day of a long walk in any way sets the scene for the following days then this was set to be a cracker! Leaving Flamborough Head and following the Headland Way north from the 1806 lighthouse, an undulating path led out along spectacular, sunlit, chalk cliffs. Meanwhile Gannets, fulmars and Kittiwakes wheeled overhead while larks supplied a background chorus. May is no doubt the best month to view the abundant wildlife along this stretch of coast, the RSPB centre at Bempton Cliffs being deservedly famous particularly for Gannet colonies and those irrepressible Puffins. All too soon the chalk gave way to the equally renowned fossil rich Speeton Clays and it was time to move inland past the Norman chapel of St Leonard in search of the Wolds Way.

Starting in Filey the Wolds Way passes to the North of Hunmanby where I joined it along a branch of the Yorkshire Centenary Way. The Wolds were largely unenclosed rough pasture until the late 18th C but by 1850 two acres out of three had been the subjects of enclosure acts. Improvements in agriculture have resulted over the years in the chalk landscape we now see, extensive fields of rotated crops, mainly cereals, pulses and oil seed rape. Through this rich patchwork the Wolds Way weaves a sinuous course, descending into steep sided dry valleys starred with spring flowers then climbing steeply onto the wide skied high wold before taking up station on the edge of the northern escarpment. Contouring above East and West Heslerton, their farms and houses hazily clustered around the village church, the Way enters a particularly beautiful wood-shaded section before a precipitous descent to Wintringham and an equally testing re-ascent past the viewpoint of Thorpe Bassett Wold. Reluctantly descending from the eyrie of Cinquefoil Hill through the charming village of Settrington, the Centenary way is once more gained as it parallels the roman road into Derventio, modern-day Malton.

West of Malton a footpath of extraordinary beauty arcs around the northern edge of the AONB that is the Howardian Hills, the spring woodlands heavy with the scent of bluebells, initially following our old friend the Centenary Way before joining the Ebor Way on the descent into Hovingham. Only those with steely determination will be able

to resist the temptation of Hovingham's picturesque bakery and café, an oasis on the shores of the ancient lake that once occupied the Vale of Pickering. With the imposing buildings of Ampleforth Abbey and school to the north the arc now continues SW joining the Foss walk as it slips unobtrusively into Easingwold.

Crossing the southern continuation of the Vale of York was always going to involve a modicum of road walking, but by crossing the Swale at the site of the ancient ford and ferry of Helperby and then taking the River Ure path to the Ripon canal towpath, kept this to an absolute minimum. Ripon itself is a fine town with an even finer 12th C Minster, though for the walker its proximity to the Fountains Abbey estates, Brimham Rocks and the Nidderdale AONB may be of even greater significance. Options for the next stage of the route, Ramsgill in Nidderdale, were north via Dallowgill, south on the Nidderdale Way via Pateley Bridge or over the top of Kettlestang Hill. Regrettably, I chose the latter, not doing myself, the deep heather or the moorland birds any favours in the process. One nil to local knowledge! The following day I determined to stick to established paths, following the Nidderdale Way at first, then long established field paths and finally an increasingly indistinct tussocky footpath to arrive at Sandy Gate and the descent over deliciously green limestone meadows into Kettlewell.... One all!

The steep climb and descent over to Arncliffe should not be missed. The early morning scene over a sleepy Wharfedale embodies all that makes the Dales a perfect microcosm of rural England; the scent of crushed herbs underfoot on the warm air, the noisy aerial ballet of a pair of peewits, the background chatter of sheep and their lambs. The idyll continues along the sometimes dry riverbed of Littondale before breaking out onto an emerald green road striding above the infant Pen-y-ghent Gill, and eventually meeting the Pennine Way at the foot of 694m Pen-y-ghent itself. From the busy summit the next day's route is clearly mapped out. Five miles west looms the geologically anomalous Ingleborough with its striking Millstone grit cap and iron age remains, whilst to the north west, the whaleback of Whernside, the highest of the "3 Peaks" at 736m stands sentinel over the Cumbrian border. This superb day's walking through some of the most spectacular limestone scenery in Britain finishes with a flourish along the Craven Old Way, an ancient Packhorse route which falls steadily into the green pool of fields around the village of Dent.

Dent with its narrow cobbled streets, shops, cafes (and brewery!), is a delight and it is here that the Dales Way is joined. It immediately engenders a sense of purpose as it climbs out of the verdant pastures of Dentdale rounding the shoulder of Long Rigg, only averting a head on collision with Sedbergh at the last moment by swerving westwards to its meeting with the Lune. Crossing the Lune north of Sedbergh allowed me to make a detour to *Fox's pulpit*, the site of the Quaker George Fox's sermon to a huge crowd in 1652, a risky undertaking in those troubled times, and thence by a series of footpaths and minor roads to rejoin the Dales Way near Lambrigg.

Having reached the entrance to Longsleddale at Garnett Bridge by a disorientating series of field paths and minor roads, the glorious prospect of the Cumbrian Fells beckoned. Firstly a farm track then green road and finally footpath carried me steadily

westwards visiting the charmingly named “Gurnal Dubs” and the more prosaic “Potter Tarn” reflecting in their unruffled surfaces the higher summits ahead. The switchback continued, losing a hard earned 200m down into the jaws of the Kentmere valley and an immediate 350m re-ascent in steadily deteriorating weather to the first “Wainwright” of the walk, Sour Howes. The bridleway from Troutbeck through Skelghyll woods is by far the best approach to Ambleside with wide ranging views over Windermere to the central and southern fells and, having survived the now unfamiliar teeming traffic, you can make a quick getaway via Rothay Park to the relative peace and quiet of Loughrigg Fell.

Though some may prefer the route over Loughrigg itself, the lower level route via the mountain-cradling Loughrigg Tarn, a photographer’s dream, would always be my route of choice. It leads quite naturally, via the grounds of High Close YH, on to that most splendid of ridges which strides out over Spedding Crag, the Castle Hows and Blea Rigg to Stickle Tarn and the Langdale Pikes.

For those with an excess of energy, traversing Bowfell and Esk Pike or even Scafell Pike en route to Styhead would certainly be a worthwhile diversion, but for normal mortals the recently refurbished Rossett Gill track provides more than enough excitement, with its fine views back down the classically glaciated valley of Mickleden. Having reached the 720m high col below Esk Hause, however, the weathered crags of Great Gable take centre stage for the first time, and it’s that “over or around”, dilemma time again. Personally, no contest! The classic south traverse of Gable ticks all the boxes, sensational situation, epic views and landmarks that read like a catechism; Kern Knotts, Great Hell Gate, Napes Needle, Sphinx Rock. The value added view of the Irish Sea seen over the jigsaw fields and steel grey water of Wasdale after so many miles is an almost unexpected bonus before turning the corner to Beckhead and the welcome sight of Black Sail Hut nestled among the glacial drumlins of upper Ennerdale.

OK, I give in; Black Sail hostel is the best, in England anyway and, at around 300m, makes the subsequent re-ascent to Black Sail pass at least bearable. On a fine day I cannot imagine a more inspiring finale to this pilgrimage through the English landscape than reeling in the summits, Pillar, Scoat Fell, Haycock, Caw Fell and Iron Crag, falling at last, over Grike and Flat Fell, into the welcoming arms of the West Cumbrian plain.

It is difficult, though, not to feel a degree of anticlimax trekking through the post-industrial landscape of Cleator Moor and Moor Row, but a huge amount of regeneration and landscape recovery has taken place here, though its heritage is quite unmistakable and quite rightly so. As if reluctant to reach its destination the path, now “officially” signposted C2C, staggers toward the coast, the lighthouse, my lighthouse even, remaining coyly hidden until the very last moment. For many however, the traditional journeys end will still lie a further breathtaking cliff top walk, 4km to the south on the beach at St Bees, but for the “Head to Head” walk this is an entirely satisfactory end-point. Seabirds wheel over the dark red cliffs, and a hazy Isle of Man floats above the grey-green sea. It feels good to be home.