

THE NORTH WESTERN FELLS CHALLENGE

The idea of this challenge is to climb all 29 summits in Wainwright's North Western Fells and return to your starting point. The starting point and order in which the fells are climbed is up to you but I offer a description of the route I followed below. I made this route about 50 miles and 18,000ft of climb. I see no need to put any time limit on this but you may like to set one of your own. Any reasonably fit person should be able to do it in under 24 hours, the super fast perhaps in under 12 hours, but others may prefer to have no time pressure.

I started in the car park at the north foot of Rannerdale Knots at 2.00 p.m. I climbed Grasmoor via Lad Hows, a delightful route and getting the longest climb over while still fresh. From here I went via the top of Dove Craggs to Coledale Hause and on up to Hopegill Head, then along the ridge to Whiteside, back again and on to Grisedale Pike, a magnificent ridge walk. I descended Grisedale Pike along the north east ridge following a wall all the way, ideal for jogging down if you like that. Over the stile into the forest, over the bridge right along the forest road. Take the next left turn and soon over the brow of the hill there is a narrow path to the right that takes you out to Whinlatter Pass exactly opposite the start of the ascent of Whinlatter as described by Wainwright. I went up the wall rather than zigzag through the trees as Wainwright recommends, and along the ridge to the top at the far end. Back to the wall which I then followed steeply down and steeply up the other side to Lord's Seat. I suspect there may be a better route back along the ridge and round through the trees. There is more distance but less climb, but I didn't have time to explore this. From Lord's Seat east to Barf, a marvellous viewpoint in the evening light when I was there. Retrace steps towards Lord's Seat, I bypassed the summit to the north, and then follow track and path to Broom Fell. There is a stile just beyond Broom Fell but no further path. The next bit might be a bit tricky in mist or dark until you pick up and follow the wall along the forest edge and on to the top of Graystones. Now follows one of the roughest stretches but there is a wall or fence leading all the way to Ling Fell. I found the west side the better going until the first of two deep gullies. Here I crossed to the east side but continued to follow the wall, now on my left, almost to its highest point before turning right to the top in order to avoid the worst of the heather. It would be difficult to find the best line off here without visiting it beforehand but you can head north to the track and turn right to the gate and road. Along the road, first left then first right to the wall where I turned left uphill with the wall on my left to its highest point and then right to the top of Sale Fell. There are paths here but I did this in the dark and the top was not particularly easy to find even though I'd been there in day time. This is a hill that would be a very popular place to walk in any other part of the country but in the Lakes is rarely visited. It would be a lovely place to laze on a sunny afternoon. A somewhat indeterminate track leads off in a westerly direction but the track around the foot of the fell is fairly obvious as is the track past the buildings at Lothwaite Side. This track follows into the wood and with new forest roads not on the map is a little tricky to follow but keep walking south east and downhill and you reach the road.

Now starts the long road stretch of about 5 or so miles. You can follow the old road much of the way so not much traffic problem. I enjoyed the contrast in the middle of the walk. For me it was dark but not very late (I did the walk in September) and had I not been supported this stretch could have been broken up with a visit to one of the 3 or 4 pubs along the way. Turn off the main road into Braithwaite, take the road out south to Stair and Buttermere, turn left to Swinside and left again at the T junction past the pub in Swinside (the last one you pass).

Next right takes you to the foot of Cat Bells where you return to the fells. If you do the next stretch at night as I did I recommend that you walk it beforehand in daylight. The ridge is fairly easy to follow but in the dark you might not be sure about the summits. Cat Bells is plain enough but Maiden Moor is off to the right of the main track and the true top of High Spy is a lot further on than you expect. From here there is the problem of having to include Castle Crag. I suspect that it is possible to take a fairly direct route from High Spy but don't try it in the dark without having made a thorough reconnaissance in daytime. I didn't have time for this so went on along the ridge and then turned left down Rigg Beck. The derelict buildings of Rigghead Quarries were very spooky at night but then so was Castle Crag. There is a narrow footpath from just past the big gate on the main track which saves quite a lot of down and up before Castle Crag which is worth finding. More retracing of steps and it is a very rough track making the ascent up to Dale Head the toughest of the walk. It flattens out just after Rigghead Quarries past Dalehead Tarn. Pass to the right of the tarn before climbing steeply again to the ridge ahead and then left to the summit, a fine view point in daylight. On west along the ridge which narrows before Hindscarth. There is a narrow path that cuts the corner to Hindscarth which is a long way off the ridge. Retrace your steps, you can't go too far back as there is a fence all along the main ridge west from Dale Head but again you can cut the corner towards Robinson though there is no path to start with. On to Robinson, again set back from the ridge but not so far. No path off Robinson, aim just north of west, when you are down the first steep section it is better going to the right of the wide flat area of Buttermere Moss but don't try and turn off this before you are fairly well past the deep gully with the stream leading to the waterfalls. Wait till the slope to the right eases and you can descend to Newlands Hause, the last road crossing of the route.

This last section has the biggest concentration of summits, 11 of the 29. Straight up the ridge to Knott Rigg and on to Ard Crag. Here leave the path and ridge to turn left steeply downhill. Aim for the watershed between this ridge and the next and climb up to the path where you turn right to the col between Sail and Scar Crag. Right along the ridge over Scar Crag and on to Causey Pike. The next objective is Barrow. You could take a direct route but it would be a very steep descent and an arduous climb the other side. Better to go back along the ridge past the bumps and then aim to cross Stonycroft Gill higher up and then turn right along the track to Barrow. How big you make this detour is a matter of judgment. Back from Barrow along the same track which you have to turn off to go up Outerside which seems to have no obvious path to it. From the top of Outerside there is a narrow path off the far end which takes you back to the main path where you turn right back to the col between Scar Crag and Sail. Turn right again along the ridge. At the top look out for the very small summit cairn of Sail which is some 25 yards off to the right of the main path. On to Eel Crag and the last stiff climb to the second highest summit of the walk. South west to the rim of Addacomb which follow round to Wandope. Take care to leave Wandope in a westerly direction not south or else you will find yourself on the wrong ridge. When you reach the main path to Whiteless Pike turn left. From Whiteless Pike to Rannerdale Knotts the direct route again involves far too much extra descent. Follow the path down towards Buttermere and at the col turn right along the ridge to Rannerdale Knotts. The most obvious descent is to the left from 50 to 100 yards beyond the top, down to the road and back to the car park.

This was one of the most enjoyable walks I have done. It is a superb route with some fine ridge walking but also much interesting variety. Lots of outstanding views and viewpoints. Unlikely to be very crowded especially if you do the Cat Bells ridge in the night or early morning. I cannot remember another walk which I so thoroughly relished every step of the way, there was hardly a single bit I found tedious and at no time was I longing for the end. I hope you decide to do it and get as much pleasure and satisfaction from it as I did.

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