

# The Way of Life

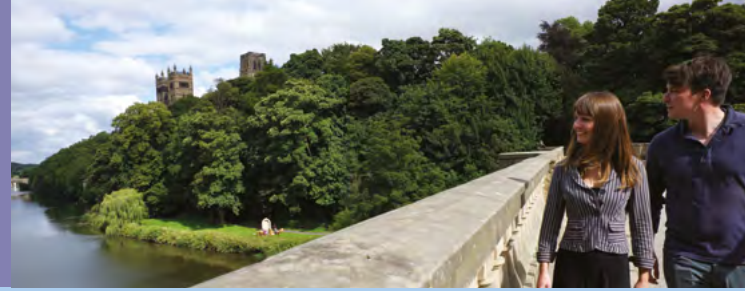


Gainford - Bishop Auckland  
- Durham





## The Christian crossroads of the British Isles



Gainford – Headlam Hall – Ingleton – West Auckland – High Etherley – Witton Park – Escomb – Bishop Auckland – Binchester Roman Fort – Whitworth Hall Country Park – Tudhoe – Sunderland Bridge – Houghall – Mountjoy – Durham Cathedral  
Distance: 29 miles/47km

***The Way of Life*** is one wondrous route: healing waters, one of England's oldest churches and a palatial castle, where Prince Bishops once resided, plus places where St Cuthbert made miracles occur.

The Way of Life commences in the most rejuvenative manner possible at one of Durham's loveliest villages, the spa village of Gainford: a vital early Christian settlement raised around St Mary's Church and Well, alongside waters

thought to have had healing properties since pagan times. Holy places lie scattered all along this trail. There is the captivating but understated Escomb Saxon Church, perhaps England's oldest still-complete Saxon church. There is the ancient residence of the Prince Bishops of Durham, Auckland Castle, only recently restored to its full glory. Then there are the tales of two different miracles attributed to St Cuthbert to unravel as you forge north towards Durham Cathedral.

This is alongside some jaw-dropping monuments to the people that once made their living hereabouts: one of the biggest Roman fortifications in Northern Britain, Binchester

Roman Fort, and the locomotive legacy of the world's first passenger carrying, steam operated, public railway, built by George Stephenson, at Etherley Incline. Nor does the path stay stuck in the past: just tarry in revitalised Bishop Auckland to see how history has been honed into some fascinating new attractions.

As it twists through gentle farmland, woodland, parkland and riverside, and via some sensational country cafés, pubs, hotels and spas, The Way of Life is a walk that soothes more than it tires. If its final climb, Mountjoy, is anything to go by, it will leave hikers feeling very happy indeed.







## Gainford

*Ancient spa village bubbling with character that has drawn people for sacred reasons and soothing ones since the early Christian era.*

Somewhere in the mists of time, at what would one day be the beginning of The Way of Life, two communities either side of the River Tees reputedly quarrelled over who had rights over a handy ford crossing. It came to a battle and the community on the Durham side won: hence how this picturesque village in Durham's far south got its name.

Water has always been Gainford's lifeblood. Another theory pinpoints Gainford's founding to a pagan well and pre-Christian place of worship: This is plausible, because the first Christians often cleansed and tended sites of former pagan devotion, and could explain the later **St Mary's Well**, located on the south side of **St Mary's Church**. This church, 12th/13th century in origin, occupies a site that had certainly been of religious relevance for many centuries before. One Simeon of Durham mentions a Northumbrian leader's burial at *Gegenforda* in AD 801,



further evidence cites Gainford as part of the Anglo-Saxon Northumbrian Congregation of Cuthbert of Lindisfarne and important Northumbrian and Norse stone carvings have been found in the immediate vicinity. As the area's first church mentioned in the history books, **St Mary's** also boasts the title 'Mother church of Teesdale'. The graceful church interior is well worth exploring and steps from the rear lead to the riverbank. To get to **Gainford Spa** you have to head west out of the village on the A67 for a short distance before you reach the path to the spa. This Victorian-built spa suggests later cultures found the waters here as healing as ancient ones had, and a well-maintained fountain still spouts supposedly therapeutic waters alongside a fetching stretch of woodsy riverbank.

Gainford village itself, Georgian houses clustered around a green, remains a special, spirit-enriching place: a wellness destination, in every sense of the word. It has a historic pub, a delightful café, a high-quality amateur theatre group and a number of beautiful places to stay to invigorate you before beginning your walk.

The most sumptuous accommodation hereabouts is a few fields north of Gainford at 17th century **Headlam Hall & Spa** with luxurious rooms, an atmospheric library bar, a restaurant part-supplied by the property's working farm and one of Durham's finest spas. The route skirts the entrance: recharge your batteries before The Way of Life winds onward towards West Auckland.



## Etherley Incline

*Track the course of one of the first passenger railways on the planet.*

Near West Auckland The Way of Life joins one of locomotive history's most significant landmarks, one of the northern stations of the world's very first passenger carrying, steam operated, public railway. Your walk from the hamlet of Greenfields through to Etherley heads along **Etherley Incline**, constructed as part of the Stockton and Darlington rail network that would carry coal away from the area's main colliery at Witton Park. George Stephenson was engaged for the project and completed the railway in 1825. It operated by a beam engine first taking the wagons up and over the hill your path follows down to cross the River Gaunless at St Helen Auckland. Wagons were then pulled by horses to Brusselton Incline, which went over to Shildon and from there on the Stockton & Darlington Railway to the mouth of the Tees. On that first life-changing day the railway opened, 27th September 1825, action began when 12 wagons were drawn up Etherley North Bank. Some wagons were carrying passengers: hence the boast that Etherley Incline is "The world's first passenger railway."

Soon after this, The Way of Life passes Witton Park. The village's most famous sons are the heroic Bradford Brothers, four siblings who fought in World War I and were all decorated for their courage, with two receiving the Victoria Cross. However only one, Thomas, returned home. The **monument** to the four, as emotive a testament to the Great War and how it affected communities back home as any, is near the village green.





## Escomb Saxon Church

*Charming church that is possibly England's most ancient, with pagan, Roman and Anglo-Saxon heritage.*

One of only three complete 7th century Anglo-Saxon churches surviving in England, enchanting Escomb Saxon Church is ecclesiastic architecture at its very best. Dated to AD 670-700, the church sits on a circular site on top of a now culverted stream, suggesting this still-hallowed ground has been associated with the divine long before Christian missionaries first arrived hereabouts.

Before exploring inside, watch out for two interesting sundials: a 17th century sundial above the church entrance porch and, to the right of the porch, another sundial laying claim to being the oldest in situ sundial in the UK, set into the wall as the church was built some 1350 years ago.

Within, a tall, narrowly-built nave indicates that even this venerable stone building is the successor of an earlier wooden church. The stone cross at the eastern end probably predates the church and may have been a preaching cross. Also of interest is a Tree of Life carved in the wall to the left of the altar. In the north wall, an upturned Roman stone bearing the initials 'LEG VI' (sixth legion) suggests church builders repurposed stones from the crumbling Binstchester Roman fort nearby; it has been speculated that even the chancel arch could have been dragged here directly from Binstchester's bathhouse. Glass fragments found during excavations have shown that there may also be links between Escomb and the double monastery of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow where Bede lived his life.

## The Auckland Project

*A tourist development that is helping to regenerate Bishop Auckland, beginning with the conservation of a medieval castle.*

Small Bishop Auckland may be, but its history is huge and The Auckland Project is telling its story to help attract tourists and breathe back life into the area. The Way of Life winds by all of these bold new tourism projects steered by The Auckland Project.

The biggest one is **Auckland Castle**. This resplendent building is an 1183-built manor house later elaborated into a castle so palatial that it's often still referred to as the Bishop's Palace. With well over eight centuries of history, its past was intertwined from the off with the powerful Prince Bishops of Durham, once some of England's most influential men and with rights to raise an army and mint their own money. They used Auckland Castle as a lavish entertaining venue and used their wealth to increase the lavishness: cue the conversion of the Great Hall into the largest private chapel in the 17th century world, **St Peter's Chapel**.

Here, look for Bishop Lightfoot's later addition of a fireplace decorated with the foremost of the region's saints including St Cuthbert and St Hilda.

After 1832 the last Bishop of Durham, switched his residence from Durham Castle to here. Following multi-million pound conservation, the castle reopened in November 2019 and all its decoration, which had historically only been viewable if you were blessed enough to be the bishop's guest, was finally accessible to the public.



*Bishop Auckland Town Hall*

Adjoining the castle is the **Deer Park**, a fabulous former hunting ground for the Prince Bishops and the real reason they preferred leisure time spent here more than in Durham City.

You might concede they had a point. First created over 800 years ago, this 150-acre park retains many original elements, like the deer house, fishponds and woodland trails.

On the threshold between castle and town, the unmissable **Auckland Tower** is a 95 ft/29m viewing tower and tourist information centre. Despite its state-of-the-art appearance, it is designed to emulate historic structures such as the siege engine

once pulled up to castle defences like this by enemies (and thus the breakdown of barriers between castle and town).

Get to grips with the area's animated history here, Prince Bishops and all.

The biggest impact on the town historically was mining, and this is honoured in the Market Place's **Mining Art Gallery** where the local legacy of life working underground comes alive in moving artworks and artefacts, including works by leading mining artist Norman Cornish.

Over the coming years, The Auckland Project has plans for additional attractions such as the Faith Museum and Spanish Gallery.

Durham is home to Britain's biggest Spanish art collection outside London and so, inspired by Extremadura-born religious painter Francisco de Zurbarán's *Jacob and his Twelve Sons* (hanging in Auckland Castle), the UK's first gallery devoted to Spanish art, the **Spanish Gallery**, will open on the Market Square soon. Featured artworks will include *El Greco's Christ on the Cross*.

Another castle highlight will be a **Faith Museum**, opening over the next few years – the first museum ever to examine faith throughout the country and throughout time. A modern walled garden, recreating the sort of space a bishop 350 years ago would have wanted to unwind in, is also being constructed in the castle grounds.



## Binchester Roman Fort

*These impressive Roman fortifications sport spectacularly preserved bathhouses.*

First named Vinovia when erected by the Romans around AD 79, this fort controlled the strategic crossing of the River Wear on Dere Street, a major road between the north and the south. The mightiest Roman fort in Durham and, originally, perhaps in all Northern England, its lifespan did not long outlast the Empire's collapse. Its stone was soon removed for use elsewhere such as at Escomb Saxon Church (see Escomb Saxon Church for more). What it lacks in above-ground spectacle it has more than compensated for in underground riches. Excavations have uncovered Britain's best-preserved **Roman bathhouses** and reveal more about this important aspect of Roman life than anywhere else. Two main bathhouses, including a commanding officer's private set of plunge baths, and an intact hypocaust (or under-floor heating system) can be visited, all of which must have soothed the stress of a fighting life near the Empire's fraught frontier. The attraction also stages various Roman re-enactments, including a weekend-long Roman festival in August.



A pleasant stretch of The Way of Life follows, first through the delightful **Bellburn Wood** and later through **Whitworth Hall Country Park**, a mansion and grounds with several characterful refreshment stops.



Whitworth Hall

## Sunderland Bridge

*Beautiful bridge playing a part in one of St Cuthbert's miracles.*

The River Wear winds ever closer on The Way of Life until at Sunderland Bridge you pass over it. There are two river crossings here. The four-arched sandstone **bridge** dates to the 14th century and the woodland clustered around it is majestic.

There was a more tumultuous time in this area's history. In 1346, under the terms of the Scotland-France Auld Alliance, David II of Scotland was in the area with his men menacing the local populace. He met English forces under the Archbishop of York and the Bishops of Durham, Lincoln and Carlisle, with troops clashing first near here before meeting in open combat at Neville's Cross closer to Durham. The Scots were resoundingly beaten. During the battle, the Durham prior and his monks supposedly knelt in a nearby wood and prayed for English victory, holding aloft the banner of St Cuthbert impaled on a spear. If St Cuthbert or anything associated with him was already considered good luck, the saint's belongings now became much more so. English forces would carry the banner into battle against the Scots several more times.



## Mountjoy, Durham

*Rewarding climb to see Durham spread-eagled spectacularly below.*

After a picturesque riverside stretch along the River Browney and River Wear, The Way of Life leads away from the water to the walk's last big challenge for fatigued pilgrims: a flight of 224 steps up to the top of a hill named Mountjoy. Whether this name was given ironically (pain could better describe what a pilgrim who had journeyed so many miles to this point might have been feeling) or in earnest (from the summit Durham Cathedral and journey's end are visible, enough to hearten the weariest of wayfarers) is unclear. Your own emotions at sighting your destination so close might be mixed but regardless, you can join pilgrims of past ages in giving thanks for having (almost) arrived unscathed.



## St Oswald's Church

*Distinguished church that once witnessed a miracle – and might have determined how Durham Cathedral was founded.*

The Way of Life descends from Mountjoy, mostly occupied by Durham University buildings, to meet the meander of the River Wear that is all that now separates you from Durham's stunning cathedral across the water. On the river's edge within a winsome churchyard, St Oswald's Church might seem Victorian, but there is evidence that a Christian community has existed here since well before the Norman Conquest and possibly even before the arrival of the Lindisfarne Community in 995.

But the story of how the Lindisfarne monks arrived is plenty good enough: it is the legend of the Dun Cow, or the origin story of Durham, and intrinsically linked with St Oswald's. Bearing St Cuthbert's bier, the holy men had been on the move a while, striving to find a suitable resting place for the saint. St Oswald's is reckoned by some scholars to be the place where the bier became miraculously stuck, despite everyone's best efforts (another candidate for this spot is Warden Law near Sunderland). Bishop-in-charge Aldhun announced a three-day fasting and praying session seeking guidance on what to do next. One Eadmer then had a vision of St Cuthbert stating that his remains should be transported to Dun Holm. The snag: no monk knew where that was. Fortuitously a milkmaid looking for her cow led the group to the spot they sought. A simple structure was erected around the bier. This was replaced by a Saxon stone church, which in turn was replaced in the Norman period by the present Durham Cathedral (founded in 1093).

St Oswald's interior is an eclectic assortment of medieval and Victorian features, with the oldest parts, the chancel arch with its waterleaf capitals frozen in stone and the four east bays of the nave, dating to the 12th century. You no longer need a milkmaid's help to proceed to Durham Cathedral from here.



## Durham UNESCO World Heritage Site

*Breathtaking medieval architecture containing countless stories within its walls.*

Sometimes the best is saved until last and, having followed The Way of Life to Durham's venerable, UNESCO-listed beating heart, you might well agree that this age-old adage applies to your journey's end. The River Wear is dominated by the cathedral, indisputably among Europe's most magnificent buildings.

You approach from the south via the arched, stone 18th century **Prebends Bridge**. Note the plaque with an excerpt of Sir Walter





Image: The Chapter of Durham Cathedral

Scott's famous invocation of Durham from *Harold the Dauntless* that tells of a man's gradual conversion from Old Norse religion to Christianity:

*'Yet well I love thy mix'd and massive piles,  
Half church of God, half castle 'gainst the Scot,  
And long to roam these venerable aisles,  
With records stored of deeds long since forgot.'*

Now head up South Bailey and North Bailey to the cathedral's main entrance. Before entering, perhaps first build up to your walk's finale a little more by continuing up North Bailey to Owengate and the knowledgeably-staffed **World Heritage Site Visitor Centre**. This is the place to gain a good overview of Durham's historic treasures.

Immediately northeast, **Durham Castle** would in another setting grab all attention, a stronghold from 1072 and residence of the powerful Prince Bishops of Durham, once second only to whoever sat on England's throne in influence, for eight centuries. The castle is now part of Durham University and guided tours are given four times daily on most days, with tickets purchasable in the visitor centre. **Palace Green Library** and its exhibitions are also operated by the University and are well worth a visit.

Yet for footsore pilgrims there is now no delaying entry to The Way of Life's thrilling climax: Durham Cathedral. Its full name is a fitting fusion of the saints that themed the start points and end points of your walk: the **Cathedral Church of Christ, Blessed Mary the Virgin and St Cuthbert of Durham**. This is one of Britain's best-preserved, most stunning examples of Norman

architecture. Where to begin? Perhaps with a visit to the saint whose memory motivated the cathedral's original builders. At the eastern end is **St Cuthbert's Shrine**, a hugely popular place of pilgrimage today. St Oswald's head is buried in St Cuthbert's Shrine. In the Galilee Chapel in the church's west lies the **Tomb of the Venerable Bede**: Bede's bones were brought here in 1022.

Durham Cathedral's phenomenal collections contain the most complete medieval monastic library and archives surviving the Reformation. **Open Treasure**, the cathedral's award-winning museum displays its collections through permanent and temporary exhibitions. **Open Treasure** displays St Cuthbert's coffin and other items associated with the saint. The cathedral has its own eatery, **Undercroft Restaurant**.

Why not take time to climb the cathedral **tower** offering panoramic views across Durham City and beyond? You will be able to trace your steps into Durham from a bird's-eye view. Take time to absorb the cathedral's magnificence, just as a millennia's worth of pilgrims have before you.





## Visitor information

For information on things to see and do, places to eat and stay along the Northern Saints Trails, see **[northernsaints.com](http://northernsaints.com)**

Additional area destination information websites along the Northern Saints Trails:

[thisisdurham.com](http://thisisdurham.com)

[visitnorthtyneside.com](http://visitnorthtyneside.com)

[visitsouthtyneside.co.uk](http://visitsouthtyneside.co.uk)

[seeitdoitsunderland.co.uk](http://seeitdoitsunderland.co.uk)

[visitnorthumberland.com](http://visitnorthumberland.com)

[destinationhartlepool.com](http://destinationhartlepool.com)

[newcastlegateshead.com](http://newcastlegateshead.com)

[enjoyteesvalley.com](http://enjoyteesvalley.com)

North East England is the Christian Crossroads of the British Isles. The Northern Saints Trails are a series of six long-distance walking trails based on ancient pilgrimage routes:

**The Way of Light** (Heavenfield/Hexham – Durham)

**The Way of Life** (Gainford – Bishop Auckland – Durham)

**The Way of Love** (Hartlepool – Durham)

**The Way of Learning** (Jarrow – Sunderland – Durham)

**The Angel's Way** (Seaton Sluice – Newcastle, Gateshead – Chester-le-Street – Durham)

**The Way of the Sea** (Warkworth – North Shields)

For further information, or to download the trails, visit: [northernsaints.com](http://northernsaints.com)

If you would like to provide feedback on the routes, please email [feedback@northernsaintstrails.com](mailto:feedback@northernsaintstrails.com)

Please note that Northern Saints Trails can be walked in any direction for any duration – you can walk as little or as much as you choose. These leaflets are designed to give you a flavour of the route's main attractions and locations. For more detailed information, visit: [northernsaints.com](http://northernsaints.com)

Non-directional wayfinder discs have been installed along the Northern Saints Trails to reassure you that you're on the routes, but full details and maps are available on the Northern Saints website.

Every effort has been taken to ensure that the information in this leaflet/on this website was correct at the time of publication, but we cannot accept responsibility for any error or omission. Things do change and problems can occur on public rights of way. If you encounter problems, please email [feedback@northernsaintstrails.com](mailto:feedback@northernsaintstrails.com)

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