

# The Way of Light



Heavenfield - Hexham  
- Durham

(linking to St Oswald's Way)





## The Christian crossroads of the British Isles



Heavenfield – Acomb – Hexham – Dipton Mill – Newbiggin – Ordley – Devil's Water – Slesley Forest – Blanchland Moor – Blanchland – Edmundbyers – Muggleswick – Derwent Gorge – Castleside – Lanchester – Quebec – Ushaw College – Witton Gilbert – Durham Cathedral  
Distance: 45 miles/72km

### ***The Way of Light***

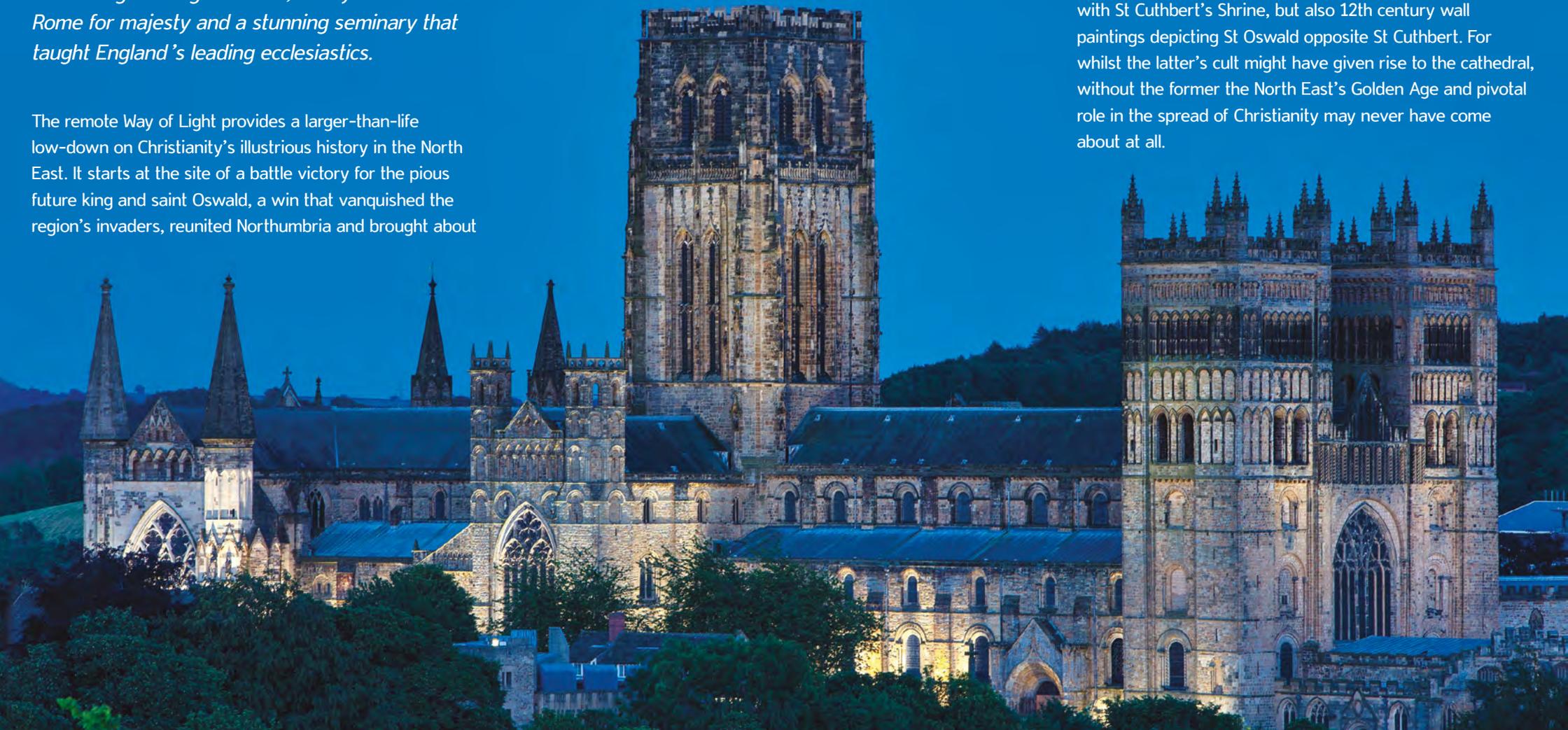
*Welcome to a breath-taking trail that transports you from the dawn of Christianity through to contemporary pilgrimage, via Dark Ages battles that changed a region's faith, abbeys that matched Rome for majesty and a stunning seminary that taught England's leading ecclesiastics.*

The remote Way of Light provides a larger-than-life low-down on Christianity's illustrious history in the North East. It starts at the site of a battle victory for the pious future king and saint Oswald, a win that vanquished the region's invaders, reunited Northumbria and brought about

its Christianisation. It proceeds via historic Hexham and its abbey, and pauses alongside one of the most wondrous testimonies to Catholic faith ever built in Northern England, one-time seminary Ushaw College, a glamorous ensemble of Gothic Revival edifices, chapels and gardens.

But settlements are few and far between on this route. What impresses just as much are the fabulous, far-reaching views from the valleys, forests and fells that form the finest upland scenery on any of the six Northern Saints Trails.

Like a guiding light at journey's end is Durham Cathedral, with St Cuthbert's Shrine, but also 12th century wall paintings depicting St Oswald opposite St Cuthbert. For whilst the latter's cult might have given rise to the cathedral, without the former the North East's Golden Age and pivotal role in the spread of Christianity may never have come about at all.





'The Way of the Sea'  
Warkworth to North Shields  
(linking to The Northumberland  
Coast Path & St Oswald's Way)

'The Angel's Way'  
Chester-le-Street  
to Seaton Sluice

'The Way of Learning'  
to Jarrow

'The Way of Life'  
to Gainford

'The Way of Love'  
to Hartlepool

**Key to map:**

- - - Route
- Rail line
- Motorway
- Main roads
- Urban areas



North Pennines AONB

## Heavenfield Battle Site

*Pretty church on a lonely hill poignantly marking the battle that began Northumbria's Golden Age.*

The simple but charming **St Oswald's Church**, on a quiet hilltop southeast of Hexham, signals the start of The Way of Light and the point where Northumbria's Golden Age began. It was supposedly here in AD 633-634 that Oswald, then returning from exile as claimant to the throne of the Kingdom of Bernicia after the death of his brother Eanfred, defeated forces under Cadwallon ap Cadfan, King of Gwynedd, who had presided over the region for the previous year. The result of the Battle of Heavenfield was a decisive victory for Oswald, enabling him to reunite Bernicia and Deira as the Kingdom of Northumbria, and usher in a period of great stability and cultural advancement. King Oswald became powerful but his success in propagating Christianity throughout Northumbria was what enhanced his credentials for canonisation. During exile Oswald had resided with the monks of Iona and had there developed a wish to return Christianity to his people (it had briefly circulated here towards the Roman Empire's latter years but afterwards been overtaken by Anglo-Saxon paganism). Now he was king, he favoured Aidan to Christianise the region. From his chosen base on Lindisfarne Aidan did just that, with big results: through his work, Northumbria became the standard-bearer for the reintroduction of Christianity to England.

There is plenty to reflect on then, as you stand on the **Heavenfield Battle Site** where all this started. Views from here, on the church's northern side and south as you descend into the Tyne valley, are also dazzling. You are only 200 metres from the line of **Hadrian's Wall**, less than a mile away at Brunton Turret there is a piece of the wall still standing.



## Acomb

*An intriguing church is this attractive village's standout feature.*

The Way of Light alights at this former mining settlement before it meets the Tyne at Hexham.

Acomb boasts the unusual **Church of St John Lee**: a rare example of a church with both a tower and, added on top, a steeple. It is believed the building was constructed over the oratory dedicated to St Michael, as mentioned in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, but the dedication is to St John of Beverley, one-time Bishop of Hexham and of York, and associate of Bede.

St John had many miracles attributed to him, not least Henry V's victory at the Battle of Agincourt. Blood and oil were allegedly seen running from St John's tomb on the day of battle and the king enforced celebration of the saint's feast day nationwide in the aftermath.

The church contains the Oakwood Stone, a cup-and-ring marking from c. 1600 BC. Stained glass windows depict the first Christian Northumbrian king, Edwin, as well as Oswin of Deira and St Oswald, and a triptych of St Cuthbert, St Aidan and St Wilfrid (the latter you will learn more about in Hexham).

## Hexham

*Heritage-rich, culturally dynamic town surrounding a 7th century abbey.*

A bright, bustling market town alongside the River Tyne, Hexham grew up around the graceful **Hexham Abbey** (see Hexham Abbey for more). As the liveliest place you'll pass on The Way of Light, it's worth savouring the sophistication of the proudly independent shops, restaurants and pubs and the cultural beacon of **Queen's Hall**, a theatre and arts centre. The other big attraction, besides the abbey and the nearby lure of Hadrian's Wall, is the **Old Gaol Museum**. The country's oldest purpose-built gaol dates from 1333. It is now a museum illuminating the tumultuous times of Hexham's past, as a settlement subject to invasions from Scotland and the notorious Border Reivers, outlaws who brutally plundered communities both sides of the border without regard for nationality. The town's setting is exceptional too. Hikes fan out from here through the undulating woods, snaking upland river valleys and hills. It will not take you long to see why handsome Hexham was once voted 'England's favourite market town' by *Country Life* magazine. The star of the show though is the abbey, which you should certainly visit.



## Hexham Abbey

*Hexham's magisterial centrepiece, this abbey shines with treasures from Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Medieval and Victorian Britain.*

The granting of land by Queen Etheldreda of Northumbria to Wilfrid, then Bishop of York, to erect a church in AD 674, shows two sides to the later-to-be-canonised Wilfrid: as a prodigious builder of churches and champion of Benedictine monasticism on the one hand, and as a sometimes controversial figure on the other. He lived lavishly and his support of Queen Etheldreda's wish to become a nun caused him friction with her husband and king of Northumbria, Ecgfrith. What Wilfrid created at Hexham was one of his finest churches. It was initially raised with stone salvaged from Roman sites in the region and, after being ransacked by Vikings, was rebuilt as an Augustine priory in the 12th century. Early pilgrims, however, describe the place of worship as on a par with what was on offer in Rome. The abbey was also seat of a bishopric in its early days, and became the resting place for several Northumbrian bishops and kings.

Many traces from the Abbey's earliest days linger. There is an Anglo-Saxon **crypt**, the **Frith Stool** – a stone seat probably made for Wilfrid around the time of the church's original completion, and **Acca's Cross**, a moving monument to Wilfrid's friend and successor as Bishop of Hexham. The important 1st century **Flavinus' Tombstone**, a sandstone memorial to a Roman standard-bearer, serves as reminder of the area's hotchpotch history. Then there is the revealing **night stair**, a glimpse of a time in the 13th to 16th centuries when canons lived in the abbey, and would descend these steps from dormitory down to service in the choir. The magnificent 15th/16th century **rood screen**, showcasing likenesses of saints Oswald, Aethelthryth and Andrew, is a perfect example of woodcarving and painting. Mostly, the soaring, arched abbey interior harks back to the 12th and 13th centuries and the Early English architectural style. A colourful history is on full display in the building's **Big Story** exhibit.

Interestingly, a significant part of the Augustine priory's gatehouse, where canons famously defended the priory against Henry VIII's troops, remains at **St Wilfrid's Arch** on Market Street.



## Devil's Water

*Wild wooded river valley that likely once witnessed a momentous conflict.*

South of Hexham, The Way of Light enters increasingly isolated country near to **Dipton Mill**, **Newbiggin** and **Ordley** to converge with Devil's Water, a wood-flanked tributary of the Tyne, which you join along an arrestingly beautiful section and follow for the next couple of miles.

And you are following in historic steps. The Battle of Hexham, as part of the War of the Roses, took place in land adjacent to Devil's Water in 1464.

The Radcliffe family of **Dilston Castle**, today a splendid ruin overlooking Devil's Water, was a powerful and influential Roman Catholic family. James Radcliffe, 3rd Earl of Derwentwater, was a key local figure in leading the 1715 Jacobite Uprising. The army's defeat led to his execution for treason on Tower Hill, London in 1716.

Signs of civilisation are few and far between, so take advantage of the local hostelries as you pass.



## Blanchland

*Fetching 18th century conservation village that regales with tales from runaway monks to muse-seeking poets.*

After the savage beauty of Blanchland Moor above, beguiling Blanchland itself, embosomed by woods, is softer on the eye and on the pilgrim in need of refreshment. One of the original and best-built conservation villages in England, it was raised in the 18th century utilising stone from already-ruined 12th century Blanchland Abbey. What locals lovingly call Blanchland Abbey is still an active parish church today, **the Abbey Church of St Mary the Virgin** is 12th century, but with many 18th and 19th century modifications. Blanchland remains every inch the magical model village to this day, deemed pretty enough to use as a set in several period film adaptations.

A Way of Light wayfarer should certainly take time out at the **Lord Crewe Arms Hotel**. Here drinking or dining is more than a pleasant trail break: it is a historic and cultural activity. This could be England's oldest hostelry (although there are other claimants to this title) and traces its roots to at least 1165. The Jacobite army's General Tom Foster hid here during the 1715 Uprising (in the fireplace, apparently). Some luminary lyricists have stayed over too. W.H. Auden adored the spot and is said to have based scenes from the play *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, which he co-wrote with Christopher Isherwood, on Blanchland, while Philip Larkin (poet) and Benjamin Britten (music composer) also stopped here.





## North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

*England's second-biggest AONB, one of the country's two UNESCO Global Geoparks and the most wonderfully wild stretch of the walk.*

The Way of Light next traverses a strong candidate for the most scenic section of the six Northern Saints Trails. Rising above Devil's Water through **Slaley Forest**, you arrive at the **North Pennines AONB**, England's second-largest AONB. It's a peaceful 770 square mile (just under 2,000 square km) tract covering the northern Pennine Hills, and you enter on the north-eastern edge via a lonesome landscape of laws (hills) and fells onto evocatively-named **Blanchland Moor**. You may seldom exceed 1,312 feet/400m above sea level here, but from the wide-open vistas of the distant Cheviots, the feeling of being far higher pervades. The path here tracks that of **A Pennine Journey**, a long-distance walking route circumnavigating the Pennines, created in honour of writer and local fell walker Alfred Wainwright.

Broad upland dales, tranquil hay meadows, peatlands and heath-covered uplands distinguish the scenery hereabouts, as well as crashing cascades including one of England's highest and greatest waterfalls by volume at **High Force**. Besides holding AONB status, this is also one of only seven UK UNESCO Global Geoparks. The **Bowlees Visitor Centre**, near Middleton-in-Teesdale in Upper Teesdale, is the AONB/ Geopark's key information resource.



## Muggleswick, Derwent Gorge & Muggleswick Woods

*Little village with big, vivid vistas including a stunning Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) double act: a river gorge and expansive sessile oak woods.*

The site of a former priory, Muggleswick is these days primarily a jump-off point for an exploration of the exceptional nearby nature.

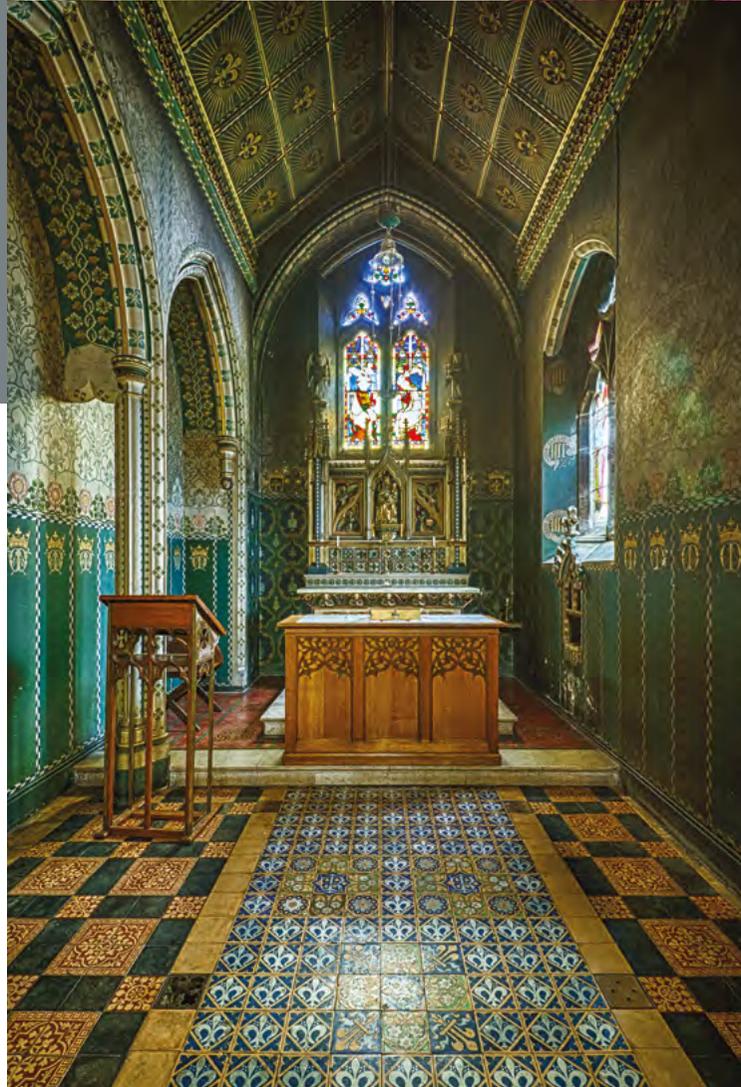
The main event is southeast of the village, where the corkscrewing **River Derwent** babbles sublimely through a wooded gorge. So steep are the gorge sides that the **Muggleswick Woods** clustering there have largely evaded human interference and make up the North East's most significant pocket of the mature sessile oak woodland, once so common countrywide and now sadly scarce. When the sun is right, the dappled light splaying through the trees and playing on the water here is nothing short of ethereal. The whole area is SSSI-designated, along with the moorland valleys surrounding two of Derwent Water's tributaries, **Hisehope Burn** and **South Horsleyhope Burn**. The Way of Light winds through all of it.

## Lanchester

*Blink and you'll miss a tribute to one of Victorian Britain's most elusive writers.*

There was a Roman fort near here and there are some great cafés in the village. All Saints parish church has a Roman altar, woodwork by famous Yorkshire woodcarver Robert 'Mousey' Thompson and there is a labyrinth outside.

The Way of Light then passes through a pleasant nature reserve called **Dora's Wood**, south of the village, named after one of the 19th century's greatest and most mysterious literary lights, Dora Greenwell. Her work was such that her name was for many years actually believed to be a pseudonym for a poet, essayist and hymn writer of prodigious talent. Friends with Christina Rossetti, to whom her style is often likened, Greenwell was born near this wood in 1821.



## Ushaw College

*From Douai, Northern France, to Durham, this seminary has grown into a gathering of the very greatest in 19th century architecture and religious artefacts.*

Perhaps the pre-eminent example of Gothic Revival in the North East, Ushaw College is a glowing testimony to the past power of the Catholic Faith. A congregation of 18th and 19th century houses and chapels resplendently spread through charming gardens, this became one of Britain's biggest seminaries in its day and would tutor numerous future notables in ecclesiastical hierarchy, including the first Archbishop of Westminster Nicholas Wiseman.

Ushaw's story began in the 1790s, when students of the illustrious seminary of English College in Douai, France, fled to England after the French Revolution. They were soon on the lookout for a new location to set up a centre for priestly training and Ushaw became that place. Initially opened as St Cuthbert's College in 1808, its fame soon grew and students flocked to it. Its popularity necessitated a large-scale expansion by the 1840s and it was then that the college buildings began their long-running association with outstanding architects.

The original chapel was built by the then star of Gothic Revival design, Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, although this was later rebuilt, using Pugin's materials and ethos where possible, by Dunn and Hansom in the 1880's: this, **St Cuthbert's Chapel**, is a lofty, entrancing space with Arts and Crafts Movement design touches. The **Chapel of St Michael** was Edward Welby Pugin's work in 1858-1859. There is also a **Chapel of St Charles** and an **Oratory Chapel**. Ushaw would also acquire many treasures, including **St Cuthbert's Ring**, left behind by a wealthy 13th century pilgrim at Durham Cathedral. Additionally, there are exhibitions both on Ushaw's past students and on faith in exile, showing the movement of both beliefs and artefacts from Douai to Durham. A café, **Divines**, offers light refreshment before your route twists on towards Durham.

Just before Ushaw College, between Heugh and Esh, you will get your first glimpse of Durham Cathedral on The Way of Light. A field here is named Salutation Field in honour of that fact, for here pilgrims would pause to give thanks for (almost) arriving safely at their destination.

# 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 Light to Durham's venerable, UNESCO-listed 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 west via the arched, stone 15th century **Framwellgate Bridge**. Continue to the market place, turn right up the hill and right again at Owengate to the **World Heritage Visitor Centre**, a mine of information.

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 brilliant climax: Durham Cathedral. The **Cathedral Church of Christ, Blessed Mary the Virgin and St Cuthbert of Durham** is one of Britain's best-preserved and most dazzling examples of Norman architecture. Where to begin? Perhaps with a visit to the saint who motivated the cathedral's original builders and became the beacon for numerous generations of future pilgrims. Indeed, **St Cuthbert's Shrine** at the cathedral's east end is a hugely popular place of pilgrimage today. The saint's remains were delivered here around 995; with his coffin also containing what is believed to be St Oswald's head. 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**. And that is not forgetting that this was also the seat of the Prince Bishops of Durham, besides today being the seat of England's fourth senior churchman in the Church of England hierarchy, the Bishop of Durham.

There is certainly much to absorb here. Step into the **cloister** which surrounds a green, laid out in the 12th century, and reconfigured in the early 15th century, to take stock of everything you have seen. Monks and pilgrims would have gravitated to this serene light-filled space to study, contemplate or reflect. You could do the same, just like the millennia's worth of cathedral visitors before you.

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.



## 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)

[northpennines.org.uk](http://northpennines.org.uk)

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)

## The Northern Saints Project is supported by:

Durham Cathedral, Durham County Council, Durham Diocese, Gateshead Council, Hartlepool Borough Council, Hexham Abbey, Newcastle City Council, NewcastleGateshead Initiative, North Tyneside Council, Northumberland County Council, Northumberland Tourism, South Tyneside Council, Sunderland City Council, Tees Valley Combined Authority, The Auckland Project.

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DURHAM  
CATHEDRAL