



# The Way of Light

Durham to Heavenfield

## Introduction



This guide describes the pilgrimage route between the shrine of St Cuthbert at Durham Cathedral and Heavenfield. All the Northern Saints Trails use the same waymark shown on the left. The total distance is 72 kilometres or 45 miles. The route is divided into five sections of between 8 to 18 kilometres in distance. The route was originally described from Heavenfield to Durham, so walking in this direction you will follow the sections in reverse order. There is no public transport close to places on the 18 kilometre section between Blanchland and Hexham.

Points of interest are described in red.

This route has particular associations with three of the northern saints. Durham Cathedral is dedicated to St Cuthbert and there is a story about St Cuthbert from Lanchester and a pile of stones bearing his name on the moors between Edmundbyers and Blanchland. Hexham is strongly associated with St Wilfrid and the route ends at Heavenfield which is a sacred site associated with St Oswald. Heavenfield is also the start or the finish of St Oswald's Way between Heavenfield and Lindisfarne. For the dedicated walker, combining The Way of Light with St Oswald's Way provides a 142 mile route between the Durham and Lindisfarne – the two most important pilgrimage sites in the region.

There are a number of reasons why the name Way of Light has been chosen for this route. The Way of Light is characterised by spaciousness and wide expansive views across the moors and hills you cross on your way to Heavenfield. County Durham has been branded as 'Place of Light' for this reason and also because of the region's association with the coming of spiritual light through the northern saints. Also St Cuthbert was particularly fond of St John's gospel and major themes in that gospel are light, life and love which all feature in the titles of three of the six Northern Saints Trails.

Here is a short story from the life of St Wilfrid that links with the theme of light...

Ecgrith the King of Northumbria was constantly at loggerheads with St Wilfrid. He found cause to have Wilfrid thrown into a deep dark dungeon and he ordered that no candles should be lit there during the night. Guards were on duty outside the dungeon and at night they heard St Wilfrid cheerfully singing Psalms. Eventually they became curious and cautiously opened the door to check on their prisoner. As soon as they did so, they were blinded by a light bursting through the crack. It was an angel of light sent by God to support St Wilfrid in his trials.

So as you embark on your journey in the words of an old Celtic blessing:

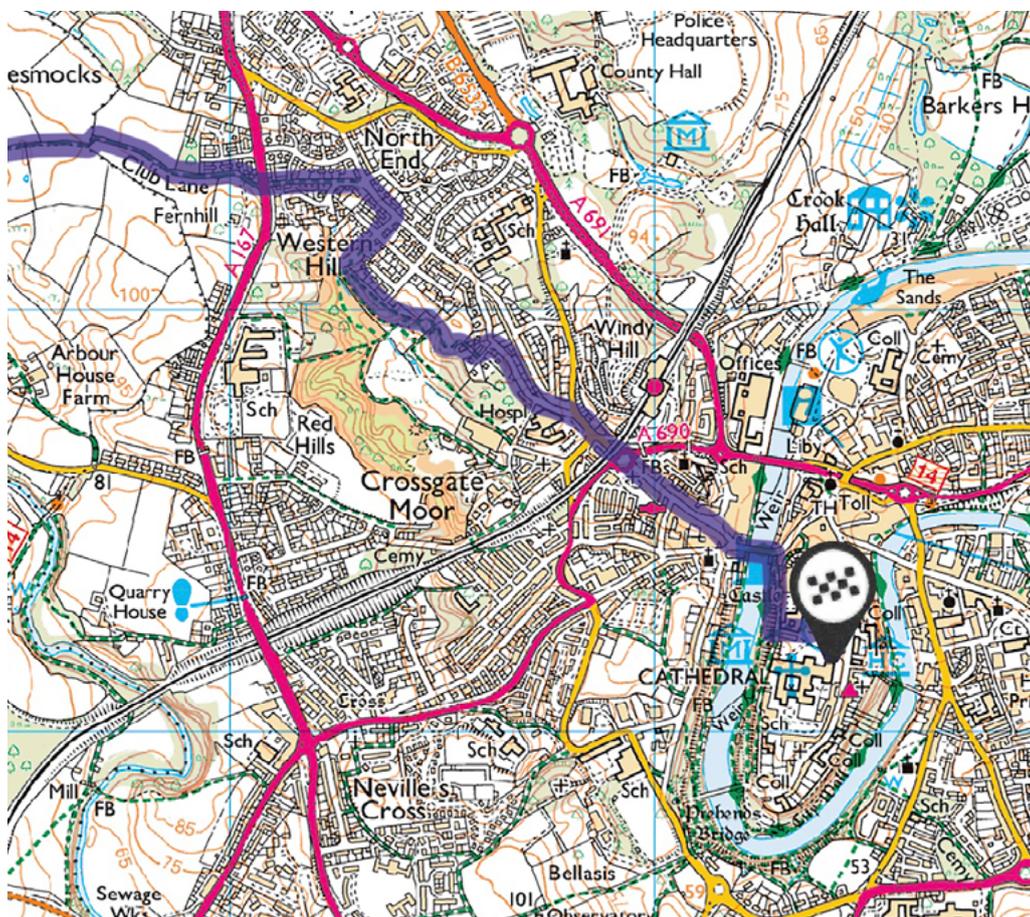
*"May the blessing of light be on you – light without and light within."*

## Section 5

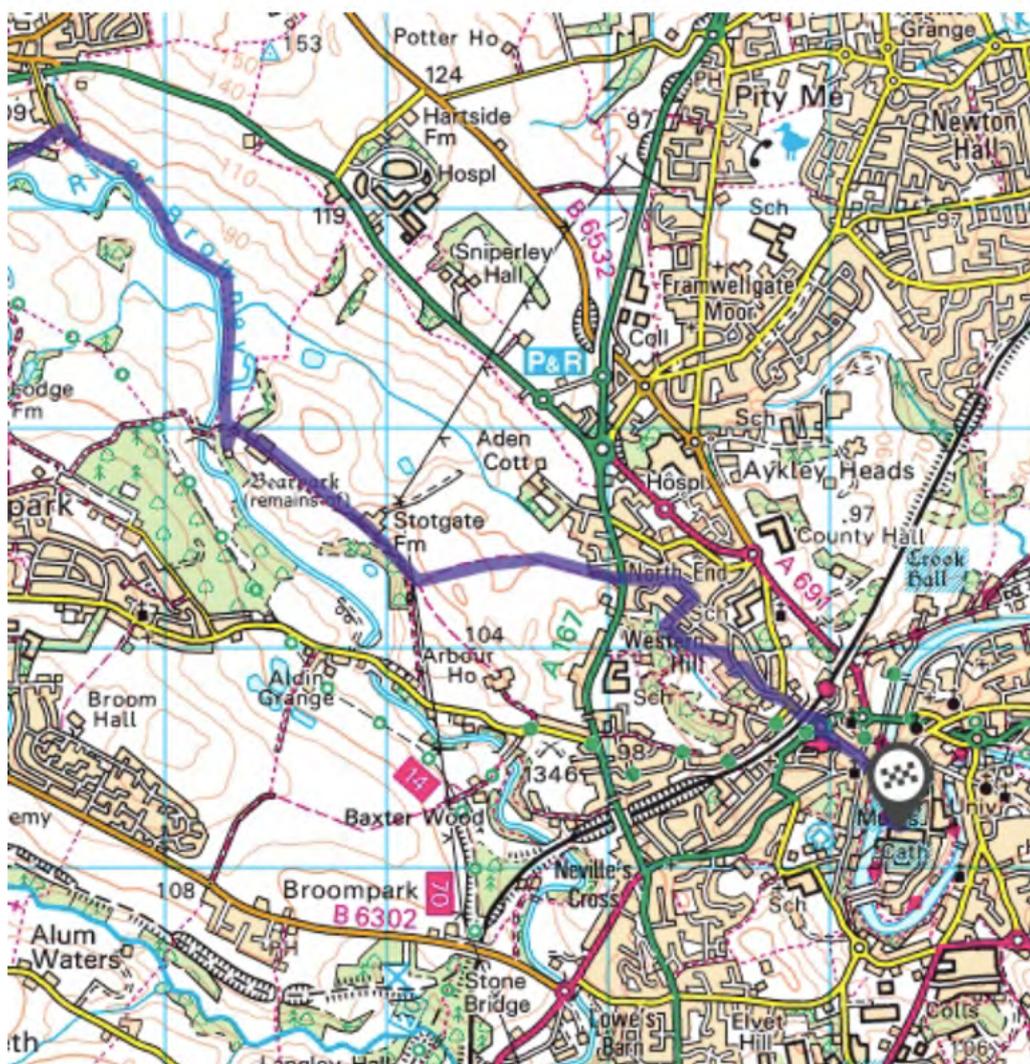
### Durham to Lanchester – 18km

When you leave the cathedral, walk to the left of Palace Green and look for a passageway on your left. Go down here and then turn right to take a path which descends to the river side. When you reach the river, take the steps ahead of you and turn left to cross Framwellgate Bridge. Bear right into North Road and walk ahead on the pavement on the right. At the top, turn right and use the footbridge to cross over the A690. Cross over North Road at bollards near the toilets and then turn left to walk up Back Western Hill. Turn right into Valeside

which leads to a path between hedges where you soon emerge onto Gibbet Knowle or Hangman's Hill. This is not a time to dwell on what happened here in the past, but it is a good place to look back at the fine view of the cathedral. On the other side of the hill look for a path where there are allotments on your right. You are now in Flass Vale Nature Reserve. Where steps lead further down into the valley, bear right with the allotments and then houses on your right. You come out to the main path where you turn right to exit the reserve. Walk up Flassburn Road and then turn left into Fieldhouse Lane. Turn left into Springfield Park by large horse chestnut trees and the footpath ahead leads you out to the often busy A167.



**CROSS WITH GREAT CARE** and go ahead to a shady lane called Club Lane which soon leads you to a stile by a gate which you cross and then walk downhill following the field boundary. You will pass ponds on your right and your left before walking under the pylons. When you come to a gate, turn right into Stotgate Lane. You will pass Stotgate Farm and then later the attractive Thistledown Cottage on your right. Walk downhill and at this point the Way of Light will be turning right to follow this side of the River Browney, but before you do that, make sure you don't miss Beaufort Priory accessed by the track on your left, which goes up a hillside to the ruins.



## Beaurepaire

Beaurepaire means 'beautiful retreat' and this former manor house was where monks came out from Durham four times a year for rest and relaxation. Durham itself was crowded and unsanitary and up to forty monks at a time are believed to have come here. There is even a record of the prior's games – '*ludi prioris*' – taking place here, though sadly we don't know what those games might have been!

Beaurepaire was first built in the mid 13th century by Bertram of Middleton who was Prior of Durham at the time. The lodge and chapel were dedicated to St Edmund. When it was completed, the manor included a hall, large kitchens, a dormitory, courts and a garden. In 1285 Prior Hugh of Darlington enclosed all the surrounding land to create the hunting park which stretched all the way from Ushaw to the outskirts of Durham.

The manor was especially known for its fine furnishings and was visited by Edward I, Edward II and Edward III during their campaigns against the Scots. The Scots were a constant threat and in 1315, the prior and the monks managed to escape as the cattle were stolen and the manor looted. In 1346, the Scottish army under King David II camped here before the Battle of Neville's Cross. The manor was closed in the 1530s during the dissolution of the monasteries. After that time, the manor house was only used occasionally by the deans of Durham. During the Civil War in the 1640s, the Scottish army caused further destruction of the buildings.

In recent years a charity called Dream Community Charity has been set up to clear and preserve this very interesting and significant site.

Return to the river and walk along the riverside path with fields on your right. After 1.5 kilometres, the path enters a wood and soon climbs higher to avoid a lower path you may see marked on OS maps but which has eroded. You come down to a track where you turn right and soon cross Dene Burn. There is an information panel about the attractive nature reserve here. There is a gate on your left which you can take to walk through the graveyard and up to St Michael and All Angels Church.



## Witton Gilbert

Bronze age cup and ring marked rocks, which are a found in a few scattered locations in the north east, have been found in this area which indicates a very early settlement here. The name Witton comes from the Anglo-Saxon '*Widu-Tun*' meaning 'wood settlement.' Gilbert which is pronounced with a soft 'g' is named after a

Norman Lord called Gilbert de la Lay who was given this land by Hugh Pudsey the Bishop of Durham around 1154. Gilbert set up a leper hospital for the care of five lepers here and an associated chapel was built nearby in the 1170s. It was also a chapel of ease associated with St Oswald's Church in Durham which meant that the villagers did not have to journey to Durham for the obligatory three masses a year. This was the precursor of what is now St Michael & All Angels Church.

From the original building, part of the chancel and the south wall with its two small, deeply splayed, round-headed windows and partially blocked south door, still remain. The font has the original Frosterley marble circular shaft and base and the irregular octagonal bowl dates from the 15th century. The church registers, now kept in the County Record Office, date back to 1570, and are some of the earliest in the County. As well as recording all births, marriages and burials of the people of the parish, there are a few interesting notes like this one about the great storm of 1614 which reads: *'on this day there was a great snow, and it started on Jan. 5th, and it lasted with storms every day more or less until March 12th and many men and animals were buried in the snow'*.

From the church door, walk down the path and go out onto the road where you turn left. You soon pass sewage works on your right. Cross over the River Browney on the green footbridge. Turn left onto the track and after 130 metres where the main track turns left by a row of trees, you go ahead to cross the railway path. Go through the gate and then head straight uphill. As you get to the top look for a stone stile which you cross. Go over the farm track. You now continue on a straight path along the right hand field boundary passing through three fields.

Cross over the farm track and you will find a path which goes diagonally left through a willow plantation. Please note that by the time you walk here, it is always possible that the willow might have been harvested! When you come out from the willow field, turn left on the path and you will soon come to cottages on your left. Walk ahead with a wood on your right before turning right and then left under an arch to enter Ushaw. Before you walk round to the main entrance, take a look on your left at the striking architectural feature which is the racket court, where the very unusual game of Cat or Katt used to be played. It incorporated elements of squash, golf and baseball.

## **Ushaw**

The extraordinary Neo-Gothic buildings at Ushaw are arguably the finest of their kind in the north east of England, but the history of how they came to be here is extraordinary too. The story reaches back to the year 1568 in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, when Catholicism was severely suppressed in England. In that year, an English priest called William Allen set up a college in Douai near Lille in France for the training of priests, who were then sent back to England to minister to the needs of Catholics who were practicing in secret, especially in the north of England. Many of those priests who were discovered were martyred.

The training of priests at Douai continued over the next two centuries, but after the French Revolution and the execution of the French king in 1793, war was declared between England and France and the English priests were evicted. By now it was safe for English Catholics to live in England as the celebration of the mass had been legalised in 1791 and influential Roman Catholics persuaded the British Prime Minister William Pitt to legalise the foundation of Catholic colleges. It was agreed that there should be one college in the south and another in the north. Initially the Douai pupils who came to the north, were housed at a school in Tudhoe, but in 1794 they moved to Crook Hall near Ledgate. Crook Hall soon proved too small and eventually in 1798 the site for the new college was purchased from the Smythe family from nearby Esh.

The building of the college began in 1804 with a quadrangle of buildings in the Georgian style and the first 40 students moved in in 1808. Over the course of the 19th century a great range of additional buildings followed, employing some of the finest architects of the time and in particular the Pugin family. The highlight is the lofty and colourful St Cuthbert's Chapel which includes Arts and Crafts Movement features. Other parts of Ushaw include several other chapels, a library based on those at Oxford and Cambridge universities and housing over 45,000 books, a museum which includes many relics including St Cuthbert's Ring and a dining hall which is now the home of a café called Divines.

With the decline in applications for the priesthood, the training college eventually closed in 2011 and Ushaw has reinvented itself as a wedding and concert venue, conference centre and tourist attraction. Ushaw has also had a close association with Durham University since 1968 and the Business School occupies the East Wing.

From the front of Ushaw, take the road round to the right of the gardens which leads you out past a barrier to a road where you turn right. After a few metres, take the track on your right. After 300 metres, turn left onto College Road. You will pass a former windmill which was built in 1817 to ensure that Ushaw College had a good supply of unadulterated flour. It proved to be too windy a spot and it was destroyed in a storm on New Year's Day in 1853.

When you come to a main road turn right and after a few metres, you will see the footpath you need to take on the other side of the road. The wide path has excellent views to the south across the Deerness Valley. Go straight through the farmyard at Low Esh Farm and you are now on tarmac. After passing some cottages on your left turn right towards the village. Through the gateway, you come to a green on your left and here you will find a cross. It is locally called St Cuthbert's Cross although it was not built until 1687, but is thought there may have formerly been another medieval structure there. St Cuthbert's coffin is said to have rested in Esh during its many travels. On the eastern side can be seen just 87 of the 1687 date and on the western side is IHS standing for the Greek letters that start the words for *Jesus, Son, Saviour*.

## Esh

Esh is a village of Anglo-Saxon origins whose name means Ash Tree, indicating that ash was probably prominent in the local woodland. The De Esh family lived here from medieval times until the reign of Henry VIII. It is not known where they lived but the village church dedicated to St Michael may stand on the site of the family's private 13th century chapel. Edward I visited the church on September 10, 1306 on his way to fight the Scots. Rebuilding of the church took place in the 1770s with further restoration in the 1850s.

The Smythe family, who were staunch Catholics, inherited Esh and the surrounding area from the De Esh family in the 1560s. It was they who built Esh Hall in the 1600s. It included a place for hiding priests. In the following centuries the Smythes actively encouraged Catholicism in the area at a time when Catholicism was suppressed. When the laws restricting Catholicism were relaxed in the 19 century, it was the Smythes who provided the land upon which Ushaw College was built. Around the same time, the Smythes built the Catholic Church also dedicated to St Michael. It was built like a farmhouse so as not to attract attention and is the oldest Catholic Church in the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle.

Unless you want to visit the village, retrace your steps at this point, noticing some gate piers which are the only visible remains of the original Esh Hall. You cannot go on to where the hall was, so turn right passing farm buildings on your left and keeping straight ahead, you pass a small plantation before going gradually uphill along the field edge. Over to your right across the field is the Roman Catholic Church of St Michael which you have just read about. When you come to a track at the top of the hill, turn left. At the highest point it is worth stopping to enjoy the very fine view which includes Teesside and the Cleveland Hills on a clear day. Closer at hand are Esh Hall and Ushaw College. This was also the place where pilgrims coming from the west got their first glimpse of the cathedral. The field here was called The Signing Field or Salutation Field because traditionally pilgrims would make the sign of the cross where they first saw the cathedral. The joy of the moment is well expressed in the fact that the road between Quebec and Esh is called Laude ('Praise') Bank.

Continue on the track which leads down to Heugh where you turn right. For the next kilometre you are on the Roman Dere Street and there are good views again of the Deerness Valley and Esh Winning. The road turns right leaving the line of Dere Street and you are now in Quebec. It is named after the city in Canada. The fields in the area were enclosed in 1759, the same year that General Wolfe won the Battle of Quebec.

At the junction cross over the road and turn left. After passing a play area on your right, walk on 100 metres and then turn right on the path which crosses a green and then proceeds straight across the middle of two fields and then along the boundaries of two more fields before you cross over the minor road of Hamsteels Bank. When the path reaches Biggen Farm, turn left passing the farm on your right. Straight afterwards, take the path which forks right and crosses diagonally down across fields. You arrive at Malton Nature Reserve and cross through it. The reserve is on the former site of Malton Colliery. If you have time, you might like to look around the nature reserve and see if in the ponds you can spot any newts – all three British species are found here. As you emerge from the reserve, there is a small industrial estate on your right. When the path turns right, you pass a row of houses and this is all that is left of the former colliery village. Walk along the road and cross the bridge over the River Brownney then walk down left to the riverside.

## A Story about St Cuthbert

The following story is told in an early life of St Cuthbert and this would seem the right place to share it:

St Cuthbert was travelling in winter time near a place called *Leunckester* (most probably Lanchester), where he crossed a river and with rainy weather coming on, he found refuge in a deserted shelter which was only inhabited in the spring and summer. Both he and his horse were tired and hungry, but there was no one about to speak to or provide them with food. St Cuthbert brought the horse inside with him and tied it up to the wall. St Cuthbert started to engage in prayer while he waited for the weather to clear. Then he saw a miracle occurring – the horse was reaching up towards the roof of the shed and eagerly pulling down some hay along with a generous supply of bread, still warm and wrapped in a linen napkin. Cuthbert realised that the food was for him, sent from God by the hand of an angel, who often came to his help in emergencies! He thanked God, blessed the bread and ate and was refreshed. As the rain ceased, he saddled the horse and set out again loudly praising the Lord!

Walk along the path by the river with the Malton picnic area on your right until you come to the delightfully named Waters Meeting where the Smallhope Burn meets the River Browney. At this point, go up and over a bank and down steps to access the Lanchester Valley Railway Path where you turn left. The Lanchester Valley railway was built to carry iron ore to Consett Steelworks and coal from Langley Park. It opened for passenger service in 1862 and closed to all traffic in 1965. You pass some sewage works on your left and soon after the housing estates of Lanchester start on your right, you come to Dora's Wood on your left. This is named after the poet Dora Greenwell who was born a short distance away at Greenwell Ford.

## Dora Greenwell

Dora Greenwell came from a well known family in the area. She became a celebrated poet and hymn writer and was a close friend of Christina Rossetti. Her best known hymn is "*I am not skilled to understand.*" She frequently visited inmates in Durham Prison and championed the cause of women's suffrage and wrote against the slave trade. Dora Greenwell's father, Canon William Greenwell was an antiquarian who excavated barrows and cairns throughout the British Isles. He was also a keen angler and invented the famous Greenwell's Glory fishing fly.

On your right look out for a brick laid path which leads into a road called Woodlands. Turn half right and go to the main road where you turn left. Cross over at the bollards and you will then find All Saints Church which is at the end of this section.

## Lanchester

Little remains now of the Roman fort of *Longovicium* which was built by the Roman 20th legion on Dere Street in about 100 AD. There was a civilian settlement (*vicus*) nearby, but the present town started life as an Anglo-Saxon settlement to the west of the fort. The church and several houses in the town used stones from the fort and amongst several Roman finds, one of the most interesting is an altar stone to the Swabian goddess Garmangabis which is in All Saints Church of England.

All Saints Church was built in 1147. Stone pillars from the Roman fort support the arcade in the north aisle. The pews are by the Yorkshire carver Robert 'Mouseman' Thompson, so look for the mice there! A very recent addition in the church is the Lanchester triptych by Judy Hurst, which is a celebration of the Christian ethos, expanded to include our natural world, which was so appreciated by St Cuthbert. He would have recognised and been familiar with Lanchester wildlife, which is so similar to that found in the countryside he travelled through during his ministries. This fine work of art is a rich source of meditation and there are accompanying explanatory notes. There is also a labyrinth on the north side of the church.

## Section 4

### Lanchester to Castleside – 12km

After leaving All Saints, you have two alternatives. The main route is described first and the alternative on the Lanchester Valley Railway Path is described in green below. In wet weather this is a drier alternative and has better views.

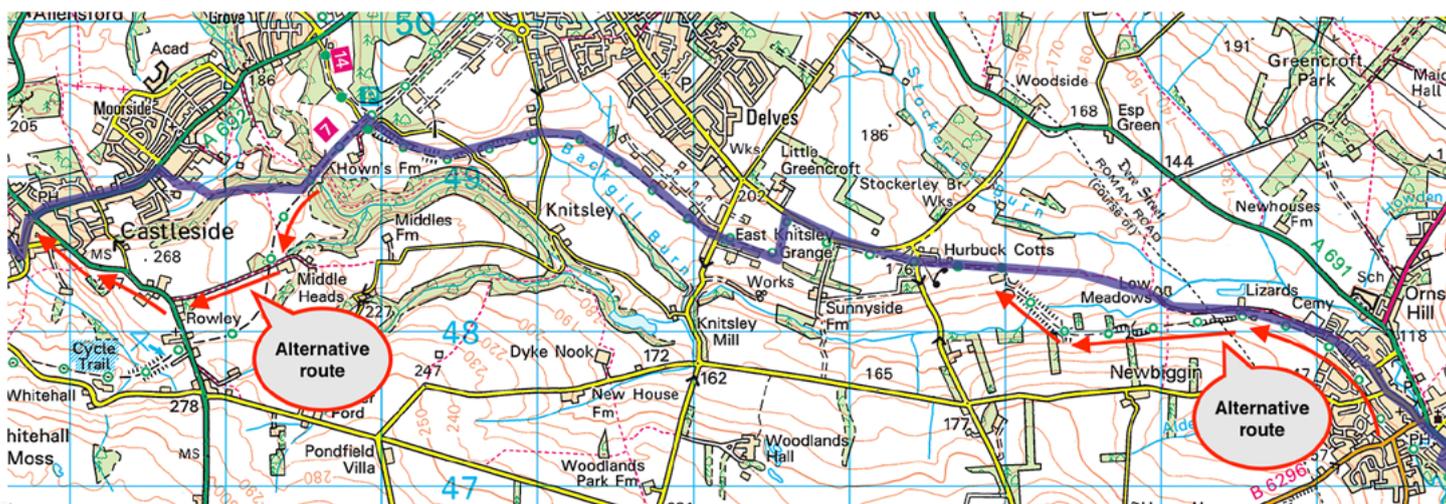
Cross with care over the A691 and opposite the King's Head turn right into Front Street. There are a variety of shops here and then after passing a primary school where the main road turns right continue ahead into Kitswell Road. You will pass All Saints RC Church on your left and then a cemetery on your right as you leave Lanchester. Walk on passing a sturdy house called Lizards Farm and soon after you cross an attractive bridge as you walk through Low Meadows Equestrian Centre. The footpath takes you straight across a paddock and then turn right to go through a gate and then turn left and walk up along the left hand boundary of two fields. At the top you rejoin the Lancaster Valley Railway Path coming in from the left.

### Alternative route

*From the church cross over the A690 with care and you may want to consider visiting either the King's Head on your left or Kaffeehaus Amadeus on your right. Soon afterwards, you will find the Lanchester Valley Railway Path on your right. Local artist Judy Hurst extols the virtues of this route:*

*As you leave Lanchester, the gently ascending gradient enables the walker to relax, and enjoy – in the right season, of course! – the plant life growing along the path. For example, spring sees the welcome return of violets and cowslips, then common spotted orchids, (we even have butterfly orchids!), bedstraw, meadow sweet, gorse and broom to name but a few. Butterflies are a treat to watch as well, and include small tortoiseshell, red admiral, ringlets and more.*

*Soon after the path bends to the right, you will come to a very beautiful view from what was a high embankment, over the Smallhope valley, looking to the west with fields, woods, and copses full of wildlife. One can see buzzards, numerous small bird species, deer and, if early in the morning, the quickly vanishing stoat or weasel. During spring/summer the sound of larks and curlews is the norm here as well. Soon afterwards you turn left to rejoin the main route.*



Walk ahead soon passing the row of Hurbuck Cottages on your right. Cross over the road and go ahead past a barrier and the path continues beside a road for 500 metres before turning left. Walk down here for 250 metres before turning right. You will then come to Knitsley Farm Shop on your left which is open every day except Mondays. Soon after you reach the road in Knitsley where you cross straight over. Knitsley means 'a meadow for knights' which gives you some potential for flights of fancy! You will pass an industrial estate on your right. You continue ahead for the last 2 kilometres of the Lanchester Railway Path with some good views to the south until you reach Lydgetts Junction where you turn left. Lydgetts Junction is on the site of the former Consett steelworks and is marked by a sculpture of a smelt wagon.

You may want to visit Hownsgill Farm Tearooms and Bunkhouse, before you go on to cross the imposing Hownsgill Viaduct. The viaduct was built by Thomas Bouch in 1858 to carry the railway across the steep wooded ravine of the Hown's Gill. Built of yellow sandstone, it consists of twelve arches of 15 metre span rising to a maximum height of 45 metres. The views here have been somewhat impeded by the anti-suicide barriers, but they are still impressive.

*[Crag Bank ahead can be slippery after rain and you may prefer the drier but longer alternative below here.]*

Straight after crossing the viaduct, turn right and go over a stile to follow a path with fields on your left and woods and the valley on your right. After about 400 metres, you will find the footpath which descends quite steeply in places and passes the crags which give Crag Bank its name. At the bottom of the hill go ahead

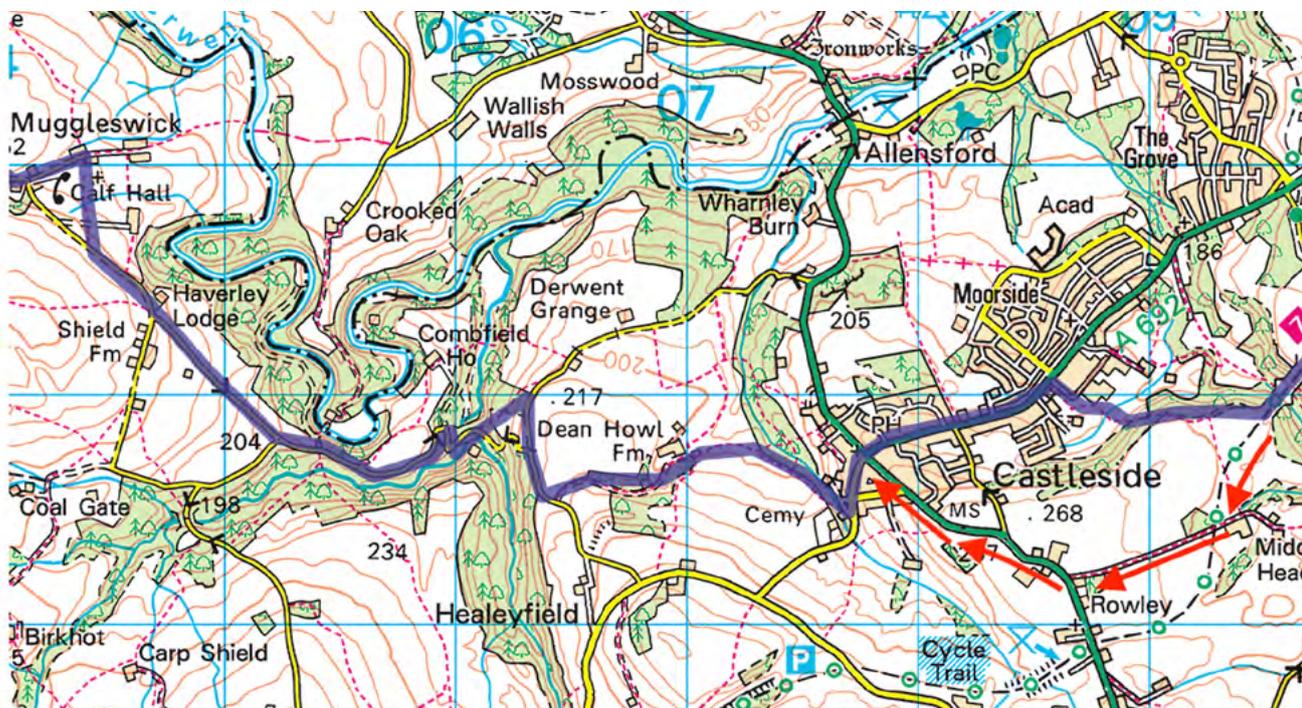
between fences and then diagonally left over a short section of birch scrub before you come to a high fence where you turn right and go down steps to a road. Walk ahead to the main road and turn left. Walk uphill for 500 metres until you come to the A68. Cross with care and you will find St John's Church and the end of the section on your right.

### Alternative route

*From Hownsgill Viaduct walk ahead on the Consett and Sunderland Railway Path for 400 metres. Just before you come to a farm where you turn right, look out for black swans on the pond to your left. Walk on the farm road for 500 metres to reach the A68. Cross with care and walk downhill into Castleside and after 800 metres, at the main road junction turn left to rejoin the main route and find St John's Church on your right.*

## Castleside

The parish church, dedicated to St John, was designed by the distinguished architect Ewan Christian, who designed The National Portrait Gallery in London and became president of the Royal Institute of British Architects. He was very productive and designed more than 2,000 buildings including 30 churches. His inspiration for St John's came from seeing a church while he was on holiday in Switzerland. He reproduced several features from that church in his design, including the attractive apse at the east end. The church was consecrated on 7 March 1867.



## Section 3

### Castleside to Blanchland – 16km

From the church walk about 200 metres down the hill then take the footpath on your right to cross a bridge over a stream which you follow for a short while before you come out to follow the path along Birks Wood. After 250 metres, the path bears left to pass Dene Howl Farm on your right. The farm road leads you uphill along a sub-glacial spillway, a valley carved by meltwater flowing under pressure beneath the ice sheets that once covered Britain. When you reach a minor road turn right.

At the road junction, fork right and where the wood on your left ends, pause to enjoy a fine view to the north. Take the footpath on your left here which doubles back down through the wood and across a field before rejoining the road where you turn right. As you walk the next stretch along the road to Muggleswick, you are beside the Derwent Gorge National Nature Reserve which is the largest oakwood in northern England. Keep straight ahead where a road comes in from the left and continue ahead when you reach Haverley Lodge on your right. The heather moorland of Muggleswick is now on your left. 220 metres after passing Haverley Hall, take the footpath on your right which soon crosses the drive to Calf Hall and then leads down to All Saints Church which is reached via an attractive lych gate.

## Muggleswick

The Harry Potter sounding of the name Muggleswick led to its being chosen as the postmark for the first day cover of a set of Harry Potter stamps on October 16th 2018. This is of course just a coincidental connection because muggles appear in the series, but the most likely origin of the name is a person called *Mucel* and 'wick' refers to his farm. Later on it became the site of a hunting lodge for the priors of Durham. In the 13th century Prior Hugh de Darlington enclosed Muggleswick Park to create a hunting park to rival that of the bishops of Durham over at Stanhope! The ruins of the prior's lodge are a prominent feature in the hamlet. A church was built here in 1259, but the present building dates from about 1728 with further rebuilding in the 19th century.

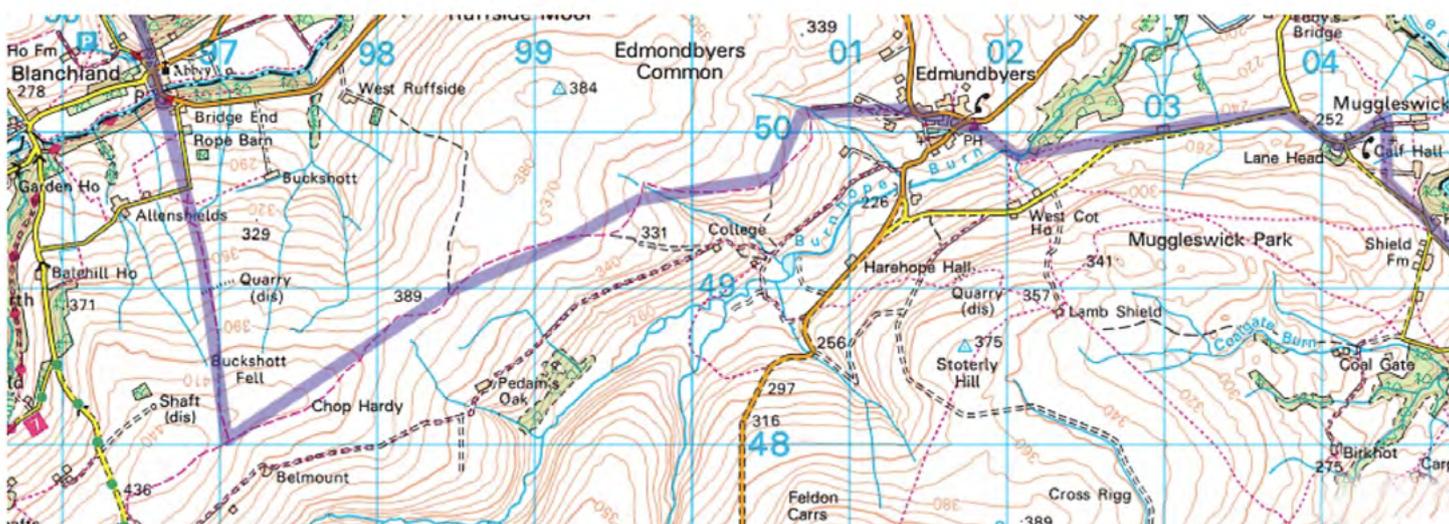
In 1662 an unusual event took place when John Cosin, the Bishop of Durham was informed that an army of Quakers and other nonconformists was assembling at Muggleswick with the intention of murdering the bishop and the dean and overthrowing Parliament. The bishop and the High Sheriff of Durham quickly gathered what men they could and hastened to Muggleswick to put down the uprising, but when they arrived there, there were no rebels to be seen. Most probably the bishop was the victim of a practical joke!

Walk from the church down to the hamlet and walk a few metres to your right to see all that remains of the priory, before walking back up past Priory Farm to the road where you turn right. At the next road junction bear left. There are good views of Derwent Reservoir on your right. After a kilometre, take a footpath on your right onto the path which, to start with, is a deeply rutted farm track. Go ahead to the gap in the stone wall boundary ahead near a telegraph pole. Descend gradually, passing an oak tree on your right. Go across the field and then follow the path alongside the fence before reaching a stile which you cross over. The path leads to a farm track which you walk down and then head for the Burnhope Burn below. There are a few paths around here but you should soon find the footbridge which you cross. The path leads you up to Edmundbyers. There is a caravan park on your left before you turn left and then fork left on the B6278 through the village. You will find public toilets near the Punch Bowl Inn. Walk on for 150 metres, then turn right into Church Lane. St Edmund's Church is on your left.

## Edmundbyers

The name 'Edmundbyers' means 'the cowshed of Edmund' although 'byer' can sometimes just mean a place. The Edmund in the name is St Edmund, who was King of East Anglia from 855 until 869, when he was killed by the invading Danes for refusing to renounce Christ. The cult of St Edmund the Martyr was very popular in the Middle Ages. The church is dedicated to St Edmund and was built around 1150, but it is thought that there was a Saxon church on the same site earlier. Edmundbyers is mentioned in the Boldon Book of 1183 which records that the village was owned by someone called Alan Bruntoft.

There are records of witchcraft from the village in the 17th century. One of those records concerns the Derwent witches trial which took place at the Newcastle Assizes on April 3rd 1673. Ann Armstrong from the village was accused of attending a witches' meeting. She named several other people in the locality who had also taken part. They were accused of bewitching horses. One Mary Hunter was said to have transformed into a swallow, after which she flew around and under her neighbour's horse, cursing it and causing it to die in less than a week. There is a headstone on the west wall in memory of Elizabeth Lee, who died in 1792 and was reputedly the last witch of Edmundbyers.



When you leave the church, walk up Church Lane and turn left onto the main road and then immediately left again. After 120 metres, fork left and follow the path which skirts round the top of Black Burn and Swan Dale before heading up onto the moors. About half a kilometre after you have reached the flatter area at the top, look out for a pile of stones called Cuthbert's Currick on the other side of the fence at the point where another fence goes down to the north. Cuthbert pops up in unlikely places! The farm in the valley below is called Pedam's Oak. About 1.4 kilometres after passing Cuthbert's Currick, you come to a gate. Go through and turn right. You soon cross over the top of Buckshott Fell and start your straight descent to Blanchland. You will pass grouse butts on either side of the track. Soon after you reach the minor road, you will pass a house on your right called Rope Barn with a very long barn. It is quite likely that rope making took place there. Methodists met here in the 18th century before they built their own churches. When you reach the main road, turn left to walk into Blanchland.

## Blanchland

In 1115, a rather vain young man called Norbert, who was related to the Holy Roman Emperor, was riding through the German countryside when suddenly he was caught in a violent thunderstorm. A flash of lightning and a thunderbolt fell near his horse and he was thrown off and lay unconscious on the ground. When he started to recover, the words of a verse from the Psalms were ringing through his head: "*Depart from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it.*" This Damascus Road type of experience led him to dedicate his life to the reform of the church and in 1120, he set up a new order called the Premonstratensians, named after the abbey of Premontre which he had founded. He founded many monasteries around Europe and the order reached England by 1145. Some monks from this order arrived in this valley in 1159 and in 1165, a Norman baron called Walter de Bolbec granted them land to build an abbey and monastery. The monks always wore white habits and this is possibly the origin of the name Blanchland.

In 1327, King Edward III stayed at the monastery when his army were pursuing the Scottish army. The abbot of Blanchland had a Scottish cousin and he got word through to him about the planned movements of the English army, which enabled the Scottish forces to avoid the English and escape back to Scotland.

A legend about the Scottish raids which were a constant threat, was that on one occasion, the monks learnt that the Scots were coming to take the treasures in the abbey. The monks resorted to prayer and their prayers were answered as a thick mist descended and confused the Scots who gave up the search and went elsewhere in search of other plunder. As soon as the monks heard that the Scots had moved on, they rang the abbey bells to celebrate, but the Scots were not so far away and, hearing the bells, returned and took their treasures and killed several monks in the process.

The monastery was dissolved in 1539. In the 17th century, the abbey and the surrounding area came into the possession of a family called the Forsters who were from Bamburgh. In 1699 a marriage took place between Dorothy Forster and Lord Nathaniel Crewe the Bishop of Durham, which was to have far reaching consequences for Blanchland. There was a nearly forty years age difference between the couple but they enjoyed a happy marriage. Lord Crewe was a sympathiser of the Stuart cause who had officiated at the wedding of James II, when he was then the Duke of York, to Mary of Modena. His nephew Thomas Forster was a general in the Jacobite rebellion of 1715 and after its defeat, the authorities came looking for him in Blanchland. He successfully hid in the rear of the huge fireplace in the Lord Crewe Arms which can still be seen today. Lord Crewe was a very generous man and after his death in 1721, it was discovered that Blanchland had been put in the hands of trustees called The Lord Crewe Trustees. It was through their good offices that the charming layout of the present village, based on the former outlines of the monastery was established. The fact that it retains so much of its 18th century features makes it a very popular location for films from the period. Amongst the many well known people who have stayed at the Lord Crewe Arms is the poet WH Auden who said that no place held sweeter memories for him.

With regard to the abbey itself, when John Wesley visited Blanchland in 1747, it's clear that the village and its once grand abbey church were in a sorry state. He writes, '*There seems to have been a large cathedral church, by the vast walls which still remain. I stood in the churchyard, under one side of the building upon a large tombstone round which, while I was at prayers, all the congregation kneeled down on the grass.*'

Five years later, the chancel and north transept of the great abbey were repaired to form the present parish church. Traces of the south wall of the once immense nave can be seen abutting the Lord Crewe Arms hotel. The chancel was built ca 1200-1210 and the transept is also 13th century, along with the bottom half of the tower. The belfry was added in the 14th century.

Six fine medieval grave slabs can be seen in the transept floor. Two have abbot's croziers, two have the emblem of hunters or foresters. Records from the 15th century reveal that the canons of Blanchland Abbey kept a pack of hounds and enjoyed hunting, but were firmly told by their bishop to stop these forbidden pursuits.

The lovely plain lancet windows, set in the north and south wall of the chancel, show the earliest-known use of zinc alloy in church windows in Britain, as the framework to hold the glass. The work was done in 1852 and it's likely that the frames buckled soon after they were installed, before stabilising.

In the churchyard there is a fine 13th century stone cross.

In December 2019, a ground penetrating radar survey done by the Department of Archaeology of Durham University, revealed possible signs of an earlier building on the site. It also found evidence for what may be stone acoustic pits under the choir, which would be a rare and remarkable example of early medieval acoustic engineering (the abbey still boasts very fine acoustics). The Blanchland Abbey Project, as part of an ambitious programme to put the abbey church back at the social, spiritual and economic heart of the village, hopes to secure the funding soon to carry out excavations within the building to investigate these features.

## Section 2

### Blanchland to Hexham – 18km

From the centre of the village, walk north passing the White Monk on your right. Very soon after, take the footpath on your right and bearing left, go steeply uphill through attractive woodland. After a kilometre, you come out of the woodland and cross a field to reach the former mining village of Shildon. When the mines were flourishing, 170 people lived here and it had a bigger population than Blanchland. Where you come out onto the road, turn right but before you do so, you will want to take a look at the impressive lead mine engine house opposite.

Continue uphill bearing right when you come to Pennypie House, which is so named because the lead miners did get their pies for a penny here! You go through a gate to reach Blanchland Moor. From the highest point on the path, it is a very gradual descent and in the spring and summer you will be accompanied by the call of curlews. You leave moorland to enter Slaley Forest. After 500 metres, you will pass Ladycross Nature Reserve in a quarry on your left and 200 metres after that turn left, now heading due west. After 2 kilometres, you come out of the forest and descend on a rough track before passing Viewley Farm and coming to a road.

When the road turns sharp left to go down to the valley, take the path on your right into the woods. The path narrows as it descends towards the river which is called Devil's Water. You will pass by Redlead Mill where you may see peacocks. You continue along the attractive riverside for another 1.5 kilometres before coming to Dukesfield Arches on your right, where there are excellent information boards about the site and about lead mining in the area. The mill here operated until the mid 19th century. As well as producing lead, silver was extracted from the lead ore which was brought here from Allendale and Rookhope.



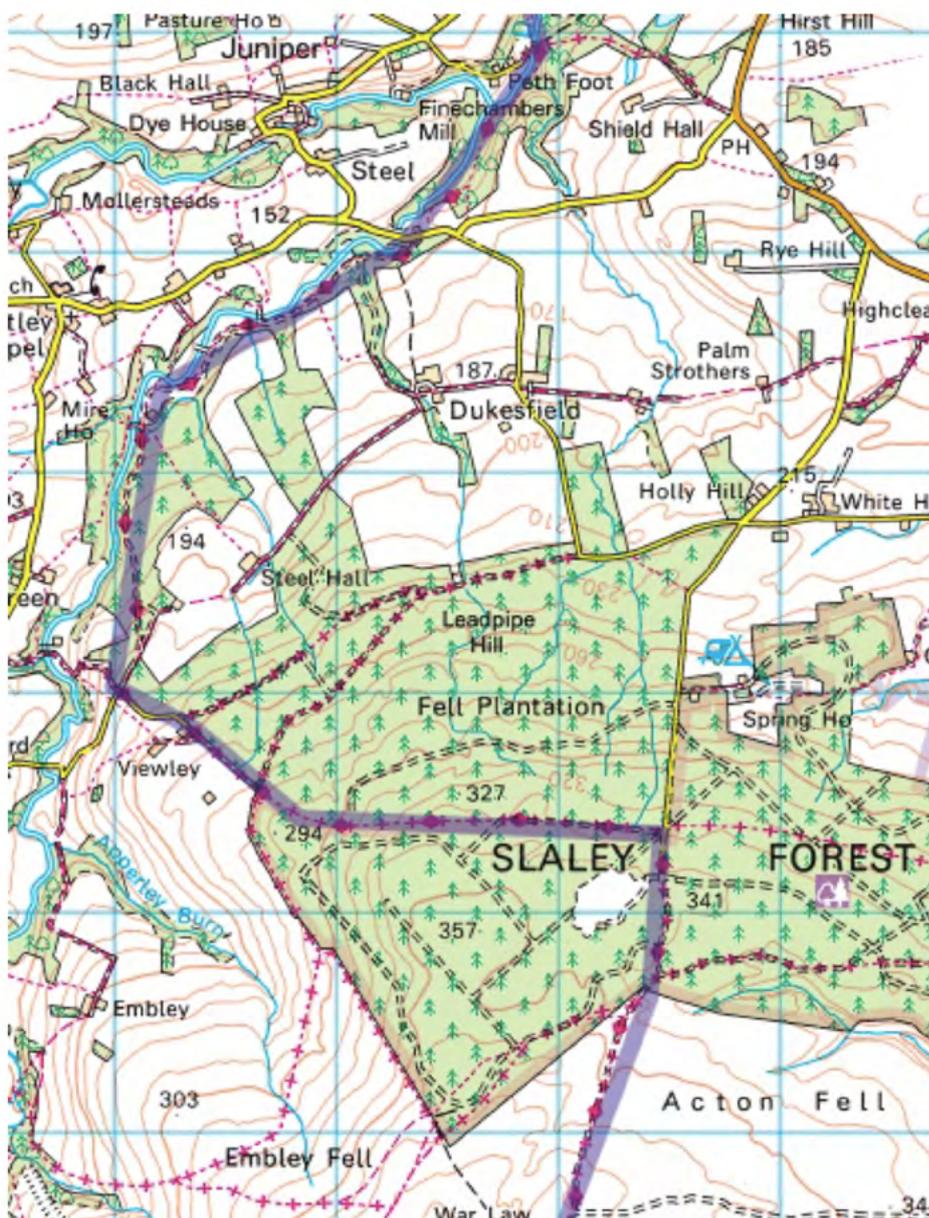
## The Defeat of Cadwallon

You are now walking through the area where the battle between the Northumbrians under King Oswald and the Welsh under King Cadwallon which began at Heavenfield, came to its conclusion. You can read more about this on page 15. Cadwallon had camped in the most easily defended site available – *Corstopium*. This abandoned Roman village (now Corbridge) was ideal. A surprise dawn raid by Oswald's inferior force scattered Cadwallon's men, causing them to flee south over the Tyne and up the Devil's Water valley. Research has shown that the battle, at least the final rout, took place at Deniseburn. This name is lost but other evidence allows us to identify it as Rowley Burn and the site of the rout as the present day hamlet of Steel. After this victory, King Oswald set about the establishment of Christianity throughout Northumbria and sent for St Aidan from Iona to aid him in his endeavours. In this way what is often called 'The Golden Age of Northumbria' began.

When you reach a road, turn right and then left to continue walking beside the river. Continue for another kilometre and soon after crossing a feeder stream, cross the bridge over Devil's Water and turn right. Walk through the field and then into a wood where the path ascends to reach a track where you turn sharp left. After crossing a cattle grid, you arrive at the road in Ordley. Turn right here then walk on until you come to the next road at Newbiggin where you turn left. As you walk up the hill, Letah Wood nature reserve is on your left. It is thought to be Northumberland's last wild daffodil wood.

When you come to some houses, look for the path on your right which zigzags down to West Dipton Burn where you turn left. After 350 metres, you arrive at Hole House. You go through a gate and cross the West Dipton Burn into a paddock. Go round to the right of Hole House, then cross a small burn to enter a wood. Walk up through the wood until you come out to a field. You follow along the right hand boundary of three fields due north uphill until you reach a copse with a ruin in it. This is called Queen's Letch after Queen Margaret. She and her son were set upon here by a band of robbers when she was fleeing after the last battle in the War of the Roses in 1464. She pleaded for mercy from the robbers who hid them in a cave by the West Dipton Burn before they could be moved.

Keep heading north until you come to a road where you cross over to the footpath on the other side. Wonderful new vistas open up of the Tyne Valley and Hexham and its abbey which is only a mile away. As you go down, you will follow an old field boundary with hedges and some trees on your left. When you come out onto the road turn right. Walk down into Hexham, bearing left on a B road and when you reach the main road turn left and then first right into St Mary's Chare, crossing over at the lights. St Mary's Chare is so called because there was a church called St Mary's at the north end. You can see all that remains of the church if you look to your left just before going through into the market area. The entrance to the abbey is over to your left.



## Hexham and the abbey

Hexham was founded by St Wilfrid in 674 with the building of his abbey. Wilfrid, who was born in 634, had been educated on the holy island of Lindisfarne and it was after visiting Rome and seeing the magnificence of the buildings there, that he determined that he would build something worthy of the great Christian kingdom of Northumbria. He used stones from the nearby Corbridge Roman site and possibly from Chesters fort also. In its early years this building was the cathedral for the region, but ceased to function as such in the face of Viking raids. Later the threat from the Scots was much greater. There were Scottish raids in 1296, in 1297 led by William Wallace and in 1346. The town even paid a £2,000 ransom to Robert the Bruce to avoid a similar fate in 1312.

The Abbey has survived all these adversities and houses some special treasures. The crypt is the most important survivor of St Wilfrid's original building. Early artefacts include the Frith Stool, carved out of a single block of stone and possibly used as a bishop's throne, Acca's cross, carved in memory of Acca, who was Wilfrid's successor as bishop, and a Saxon chalice unearthed in a grave. A replica of the chalice can be seen in the south choir aisle and the original is displayed in the Big Story Exhibition. In Norman times, the abbey became an Augustinian priory and between 1170 and 1250, the eastern part of the church, that is the choir, transepts and tower, was rebuilt in the Early English style. It was during this time that the superb night stair was built. The present nave on medieval foundations was only built in 1907/8.

There is an outstanding collection of 84 15th and 16th century painted panels which is the largest single collection of painted panels in the country. The majority of them depict the northern saints. The northern saints with scenes from their lives, also feature in the great west window which dates from 1916-1918 and was made by Henry Bosdet.

Most of Hexham's history is inevitably linked to the abbey but one other event of particular note was the Hexham Riot which took place in the Market Place in 1761. This occurred when the people of the town protested against changes in the procedures for serving in the militia. Troops from the North Yorkshire Militia were called in and they opened fire and killed 51 of the protesters.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Hexham was renowned for its leather industry and most particularly for making gloves which were called Hexham Tans. Today the town is an important shopping centre for the surrounding countryside and is also a centre for those who wish to explore the central section of the Roman Wall.



## Section 1

### Hexham to Heavenfield – 8km

After visiting the abbey, walk to the right and enter the park. Keep walking round to the right with the abbey on your right and when you leave the park turn right and left in Cowgarth. Near here there used to be accommodation for pilgrims. Walk under St Wilfrid's Arch and turn right into Market Street. Fork left into the

cobbled Back Row and then walk steeply down Hallstile Bank. Cross over to the Tesco's side of Alemouth Road and head out of Hexham crossing over the railway and then the River Tyne. Shortly before you reach the A69, take the lane on your left. This runs parallel to the A69 and leads to the footbridge which you cross. Turn right and then left uphill until you reach a crossroads by the charming Peaslaw Gates Cottage where you turn left. You will soon come to the church of St John the Evangelist.

### St John Lee

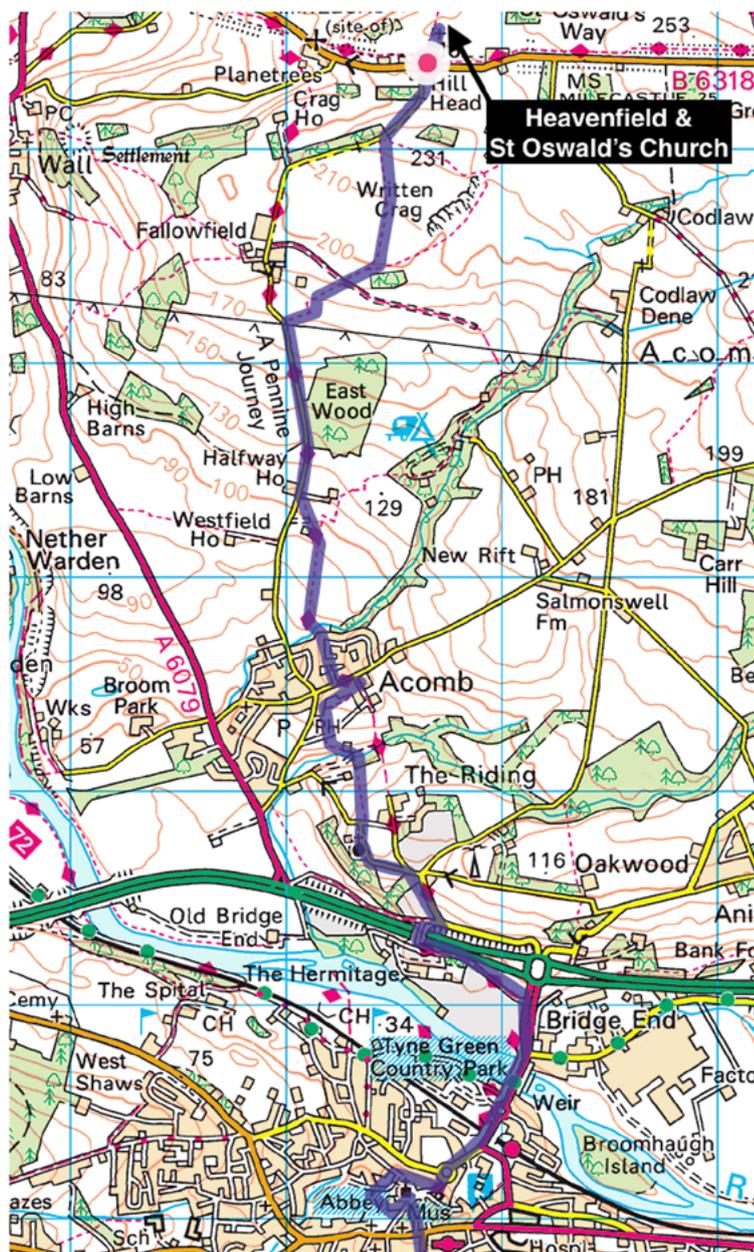
The church is dedicated to St John of Beverley who died c. 721 AD. He became Bishop of Hexham in 687 and later Bishop of York in 705, before going on to establish a monastery at Beverley. He was well known for his care for the poor, his great scholarship and as a miracle worker both during his life and after he died.

There was a church on this site from medieval times, but the present church is mostly the consequence of a rebuild in 1816. The tower and spire were added in 1865. Inside the church there is a Roman altar which was once used as a font and also a cup and ring marked rock called 'The Oakwood Stone' which dates from 1600 BC.

In 1765, a very unusual marriage took place here. Robert Scott, a well known player of the Northumbrian pipes who was 90 years old was married to 25 year old Jean Middlemas. Robert had been using crutches for 26 years but on the morning of his marriage, he threw his crutches away and walked 3 miles from Wall and after the service walked back with fellow pipers. Some wondered if this miracle should be attributed to St John of Beverley!

After visiting the church, turn left up the narrow road to the T-junction where you cross over, going through a gate into a field. Walk straight down and cross a bridge over a burn. Bear left up across the field and you will find two kissing gates to cross a driveway. Cross the field to find steps and a gate leading to a wooded lane where you turn right with houses on your left. At the end of the lane, turn left into Acomb. Turn left again at the T-junction and you pass The Miners Arms Inn on your left. The Miners Arms was so called because there was a lead mine nearby and also a coal mine which in 1886 employed 200 miners.

Take the footpath on your right which leads you down via steps to cross a burn. Just north east of here in Fallowfield Dene, lead mining took place from as early as 1611 up until 1846. After that, it was mined for the two very rare minerals of alstonite and witherite. Walk up to the field and go ahead for 200 metres until you find some steps on your left where you go over into a field. Walk round to the right of the attractive house with the tall chimney. Bear diagonally left towards the corner of the field. You come to a lane where you turn left and then right to walk up the road. After passing East Wood on your right, take the footpath on your right which goes up to cross a farm track and then continues across rough ground where the path is indistinct at times. There is a conifer plantation on your right as you head due north. Look for the gate ahead which you go through and then turn right on a road and go through another gate and then walk downhill to reach the B6318 by St Oswald's Cottage. Cross over and go through the gate by the tall oak cross which was erected in the 1930s. Walk up the grassy path to your destination at St Oswald's Church and make sure you walk round to the northern side to enjoy the excellent views before you leave.



## Heavenfield

This field with its simple church has traditionally been the site of the battle of Heavenfield which took place in 634 AD, but new research by Max Adams (see *The King in the North 2013 Head Zeus*) suggests otherwise.

A year before this battle took place, an invading force of Welsh under King Cadwallon and Mercians under King Penda had defeated the Northumbrians at the Battle of Hatfield near Doncaster. Edwin, the king of the Northumbrians was killed and

Cadwallon's army laid waste Northumbria, whose kingdom was split in two between Eanfrith who became king of Bernicia and Osric who ruled Deira. However very soon both kings were killed by Cadwallon. At this point, Eanfrith's brother Oswald returned from seventeen years of exile on Iona to claim the throne.

The threat of Cadwallon however remained and when Oswald learnt that he was advancing with a huge force, he had to raise an army as soon as possible. This army assembled at Heavenfield where Oswald had a vision of St Columba who said to him, *"Be strong and act manfully. Behold, I will be with thee. This coming night go out from your camp into battle, for the Lord has granted me that at this time your foes shall be put to flight and Cadwallon your enemy shall be delivered into your hands and you shall return victorious after battle and reign happily."* Here is how the Venerable Bede describes what followed:

*"Oswald set up the sign of the holy cross and, kneeling down, prayed God to send his heavenly aid to those who trusted in him in their dire need. This place is pointed out to this day and held in great veneration. It is said that, when the cross had been hurriedly made and the hole dug in which it was to stand, the devout king with ardent faith seized the cross and placed it in position himself, holding it upright with his own hands until the soldiers had heaped up sufficient earth so that it stood firm. This done he raised his voice, and calling out to his army, said 'Let us kneel together, and pray the true, the ever living and almighty God to protect us in his mercy from the arrogant savagery of our enemies, for he knows that we fight in a just cause for the preservation of our nation.' The whole army did as he ordered and, advancing against the enemy as dawn was breaking, they won the victory that their faith deserved. At this spot where the king prayed, innumerable miracles of healing are known to have occurred which serve as a reminder and memorial of the king's faith. This place is known as the 'Heavenly Field', which name bestowed upon it a long time ago, was a sure omen of future events, indicating that there the heavenly sign would be set up, a heavenly victory won, and heavenly miracles take place."*

The rest of the story of this battle is described on page 15 (**The Defeat of Cadwallon**) at the place where it is now believed that much of the battle took place.

The church itself is probably the third on the site, the first being a Saxon church built soon after the battle. A medieval church followed and in 1887, it was remodelled and the porch and bellcote were added. The porch contains some relics of an earlier Elizabethan restoration as well as fragments of a medieval cross shaft. An unusual feature is the gas-lighting, for safety reasons now disconnected. The two painted figures behind the altar are of St Aidan and St Oswald.

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In my research for other entries here on local history, I have used a wide variety of sources, but would particularly like to acknowledge the usefulness of England's North East website, where more detailed information about places on the route can be found – <https://englandsnortheast.co.uk/>

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For more information on the Northern Saints Trails, see [northernsaints.com](http://northernsaints.com)