

Hadrian's Cycleway (HCW) National Cycle Network 72 13th to 17th August 2023



13th August: The journey begins...

Set the alarm for 05:30 so I had time for a little yoga practice and a short, brisk walk as I was going to spend a lot of the day sat on various trains.

Had some breakfast and a final 'faff' with bags and bike before loading into the van. Drove into Bristol with Roz and stopped just outside the Clean Air Zone to pedal the last bit to Temple Meads Station. To the ticket office and collected the train tickets before making my way to the platform and wait for the train. Train arrived on time. 09:15, boarded, then struggled to get the loaded bike into the storage compartment (wide handlebars and 29" wheels!). Found a seat and settled back, next stop Birmingham New Street. The train got remarkably busy. At Birmingham, retrieved bike and onto the next train, 11:07 to Glasgow, located bike storage and found a seat nearby, next stop for me, Lancaster. At Lancaster, off one train, across the platform, straight onto the next one. Bike storage was full but managed to find somewhere to put the bike and got a seat close to hand. All connections made successfully, next stop Ravenglass. Duly arrived at about 15:05. Got my bearings and pedalled along to Glannaventa Roman Fort (bath house). The remains were a bit of a disappointment. Obviously in a state of disrepair but now surrounded and obscured by Heras fencing, making it difficult to get decent photographs. Not ideal.



Glannaventa Roman bath house

That done, onwards to find the campsite at Cumblands. I had already booked a pitch for the night (£10/night), got the tent set up and cycled along to the Spar shop at Holmrook (garage on A595) for some meagre supplies and returned to the campsite.

Spent the rest of the late afternoon in the tent, something to eat and drink, phoned home and watched the clouds rolling over the fells, getting ever darker. The weather for tomorrow is not great – heavy rain. The heather is in bloom on some fells colouring them purple – very scenic.

14th August: Alarm set for 06:00. It had rained in the early hours, just enough to soak the tent but it wasn't raining now. So got up and packed away ready to get on the road while it was dry. A brief discussion with the farmer/campsite owner established that the forecast had changed a bit with the rain now coming in the afternoon. Left site around 07:20.

I had decided on the 3-day More Wall Alternative described in the guidebook, today covered the greatest distance of the 3-day route. Mostly following National Cycle Network (NCN) 72.



Bike set-up: Whippet XC (carbon-fibre) 29" wheels, Tailfin (rear) and Aeroe Frame (front)

On road to start the day's ride including a short section of the main A595 to Seascale where the NCN 72 ends on a technicality. So, from here I followed a section of the English Coast Path (ECP) to Sellafield. It was a bit narrow and overgrown in places and involved a tiny bit of 'hike-a-bike' but straight forward otherwise. Returned to roads (and NCN 72) at Sellafield and some cycle paths too. At Egremont I considered visiting the 12th century castle but opted instead for some breakfast stopping at a local Gregg's.

From the town there are long sections of traffic-free paths (shared with Coast-to-Coast, C2C), through Whitehaven, Workington, and Maryport, and onto Allonby. It had started to rain at Maryport, lightly at first but along the Promenade I decided to put my jacket on. From the Promenade there were views across the water to the Scottish coastline. The rain wasn't particularly hard, but it was persistent and there was a cross/headwind too. At Allonby, I stopped for something to eat.

After lunch, the route followed roads, sometimes busy, but mostly quiet. It was quite flat, much like cycling over the Somerset Levels. There were lots of puddles and standing water now, and I was wet. The route meandered through Silloth, Abbeytown, Newton Arlosh, Angerton, to Whiterigg. Here, a signpost pointed the way east to Bowness-on-Solway, 3 miles, however, the NCN 72 turned west to Anthon, where Bowness-on-Solway was signposted, 6 miles! A long loop was followed around to the Solway Firth to finally arrive at Bowness-on-Solway. Wallsend Campsite was signposted, and I rolled

along to pitch there for the night (£15). It was still raining. I paid the fee and was shown the facilities and where to pitch and was left to it.

It is always a 'faff' pitching in the rain, but I managed to get the job done reasonably quickly. There were many midges too. That task completed it was time for a shower and a change into some dry clothes.



Bowness-on-Solway

There was a 'drying' area onsite so was able to hang-up wet kit. The small kitchen was put to use to charge phone and power-pack, and I had a cup of tea. Back to the tent to write up today's activities. It had been too wet to sketch.

Ravenglass to Bowness-on-Solway: 74 miles/119km, 721m elevation gain (according to the guidebook)

My first 100km ride for quite a while probably since JOGLE last year. Felt good and, in spite of the weather, I really enjoyed today's ride. It is nice to cycle through places you have not been to before. Even though they were washed-out north western towns.

And it was still raining. Nothing else to do but lie-back and wait for the rain to stop. It did, about 19:00, quickly over to the kitchen to make something to eat and drink before returning to the tent.

Listened to Stephen Fry reading Mythos (audiobook), his interpretation of Greek mythological tales and legends. Interesting and easy listening.

15th August: Well, the rain has passed over but, of course, everything is thoroughly sodden.

Alarm at 06:00, got up, dressed and over to the facilities, washed, light breakfast (usual fare of coffee and porridge), packed tent and loaded bike, on the road again just before 08:00.

A mostly flat road section, although gently rolling at times, to start the day alongside the Solway Firth to quickly arrive at Carlisle (c. 20km). The roads became busier initially and then the route followed parkland paths through the town. The River Eden was swollen with red-brown sediment laden water, a lot of rain must have fallen in the upland catchment. Back onto roads, a meandering hillier route to Brampton (c. 45km) where I stopped for a cooked veggie breakfast.

Just over 100 miles of HCW completed and now it is getting hilly. It is a bit cloudy, but it is dry and forecast to brighten later this afternoon. A look at the map, not too far now to reach the more visible sections of Hadrian's Wall and there is plenty of it to enjoy.

From Brampton, a moderately long, steady climb to Banks. It from here that the wall can be seen in all its 'glory' with the associated mile castles and other structures. The road from Banks to Birdoswald is

adjacent to wall. I did stop, briefly, at Birdoswald, but thought the £14 admission fee was excessive [*English Heritage*] and so, pressed on. Rolled along the NCN 72 to Greenhead and a very steep climb up to the Roman Army Museum where I stopped. Paid the £8 admission fee and had a good look around the museum. Interesting displays and an entertaining 3D film 'Edge of Empire' to watch (20 minutes). Time for a tea as well.



From Banks to Birdoswald the route is adjacent to Hadrian's Wall

From the museum car park. A No Through Road signposted Walltown Crags is the beginning (or end) of the 'More Wall Alternative.' The track leads to a car parking space to the crags and to several farms before becoming a bridleway. Most of it is 'tarmac' sometimes rough but a short section of lumpy gravel in the mid-section, almost entirely traffic-free. Rejoins the main road for a short distance then turns onto a long loop to Whiteside. There were some fine views of the Whin Sill geological feature along which Hadrian's wall is constructed.



*"The Whin sill is composed of quartz-dolerite, much of it medium- to fine-grained, though with very fine-grained **tachylitic** rocks adjacent to its chilled contacts and with some spectacular coarse-grained dolerite pegmatite bodies locally in its central parts. Vesicles, some with excellent examples of ropy flow structures reminiscent of pahoehoe lava, have been recorded in exposures in the Bamburgh and Lindisfarne areas. Well-developed columnar jointing is conspicuous in most exposures of the sill. It has been estimated that the volume of magma intruded as the complex comprises at least 215 km³, and probably very much more."(Geological Society of London)*

Tachylite (**tachylitic**) is a form of basaltic volcanic rock, formed naturally by the rapid cooling of molten basalt.

A steep climb up and over the sill (crag) then a descent to the main road at Twice Brewed, along the road to Winshields Campsite at Once Brewed. A notice on the reception door gave an instruction to

pitch tent on arrival so that is what I did. It didn't take long to dry the tent out, there was a good drying wind, and it was pleasantly warm. Found the campsite owner, paid the £10/night fee, made a brew, had a shower, and changed into something more comfortable.

Bowness-on-Solway to Once Brewed: 49 miles/79km, 932m elevation gain

It had been another very enjoyable day's pedalling. I suppose I could have spent more time at the Roman stuff, but I wanted to get kit dry and some time to chill. Anyway, to me, it is all about the bike ride, first and foremost.

I have had several compliments from other cyclists I have met along the way regarding my bike set-up.

Another campsite with a communal area with small kitchen and space to sit and chill. I made good use of the facilities on offer, something to eat and drink, a conversation with the campsite owner and other guests at the site (including a guy I had met at the last campsite). Eventually, I retired to my tent and settled down to listen to Stephen Fry's audiobook, *Mythos*.

There is a road nearby, and a lot of sheep!

16th August: Destination South Shields and the end of Hadrian's Cycleway...

Alarm at 06:00. The sheep are already awake! But, even so, another good night's rest. Arose, breakfast, chatted with other early risers, packed kit, and loaded bike, sat down to pen a few notes. The midges were becoming annoying so got on my bike and pedalled away. On the road at 07:45.

Along the bust road back to Twice Brewed, then turning off toward Vindolanda. It didn't take long to arrive at the well-known Roman site but, unfortunately, it wasn't open until 10:00 and I wasn't going to hang around till then. Climbed onto the boundary wall and took a few photos from a distance. A steep descent down to a [dry] ford followed by an initially steep climb before easing to a more moderate gradient up to the highest point of the Hadrian's Cycleway.



Over the highest point of Hadrian's Cycleway

From the summit, an amazing descent, nearly 10km, all the way to Newbrough. I stopped to remove my jacket and grazed on a few nibbles – nuts, dried fruits, and 'Tangfastics' and wine gums!

Then rolled along some steady climbs and descents to Hexham. Nothing of interest here so kept going until reaching Corbridge Roman Town where I decided to stop. I was a bit early but chatted to a 'biker' while we waited for 15 minutes for the site to open.

An impressive complex with plenty of interest and well worth the £11:30 admission fee (with concession). Lots of nice artefacts on display in the museum and good information boards around the site [*English Heritage*]. Took plenty of photographs.



The remains of a fine granary at Corbridge Roman Town

- Bike security is a bit of an issue when touring, probably okay at visitor centres but not so good at remote sites!

A busy road through Corbridge with a steady climb out of the town. The usual impatient ‘wankers’ on the road! I was glad to turn off the main road and back into quieter country backroads and a nice descent down to the River Tyne. Rolling alongside the river to Tyne Riverside Park (Prudhoe) where I had a break for something to eat and drink. About 45km pedalled so far today.

Only trouble with shared paths, especially when close to a car park, is pedestrians and dog-walkers. Ring your bell as much as you like it will, usually, be ignored or ear buds are in use. That aside, it was a largely traffic-free ride along the river valley. There were road crossings, and the path was parallel to the road at times but, eventually, arrived at Newcastle. Along the riverside through the city was frustratingly slow far too many aimless wanderers, and there were the usual urban route-finding issues with paths going in several directions. It felt like a long drag to reach to the ferry (return cost £3.45). But I got there and was soon across the River Tyne at South Shields. Just a mile to go to reach Arbeia Roman Fort and the end of Hadrian’s Cycleway (171 miles).

Once Brewed to South Shields: 48 miles/77km, 721m elevation gain. Total = 171 miles

Entry to the Roman fort was free [*English Heritage*] but I felt obliged to leave a donation (£5). Well worth it. Some interesting reconstructions/interpretations and extensive remains to be seen (foundation walls, etc.). All good and done it was back on the bike and return to the ferry and over the river again. Retraced the path back to Newcastle city centre to find the Travelodge hotel where I had accommodation booked for tonight (£39.99). soon located the hotel, booked in, and up to my room (with bike). Usual things, got settled, showered, wrote some notes, before going down to the diner for something to eat and drink. After eating I decided to take a walk and find the train station to save some time in the morning and to stretch my legs. Returned to the hotel to relax for the rest of the evening.

Garmin details for today: 97.73km, 5:36:31, 639m elevation gain (?)

Not only had Hadrian’s Cycleway been completed but also an east to west Coast-to-Coast ride!

17th August: Job done I’m going home...!

It has to be said that overnighting in a central city location is not exactly peaceful and does not compare well with camping in the open countryside. There is a constant background of ‘white noise’ – that includes traffic, machines whirring (air-conditioning?), and alarms going off!



Reconstructed gatehouse, Arbeia Roman Fort, South Shields

As usual, alarm at 06:00. Got up, packed and loaded bike ready to leave then went down for a cooked breakfast to set me up for the day ahead. After breakfast, back to the room, a final check then made my way to the station to wait for the train. Typical of me I was quite early but thought I might just as well be here as sat around in a hotel room. Tickets sorted, found the required platform, and spent the next hour or so people watching.

The train arrived on time, 09:39, boarded, and then a bit of a struggle to get the bike secure in the narrow storage compartment (wide handlebars). Eventually I managed to secure it satisfactorily and went to my seat. Only thing to do now was to sit back and enjoy the ride – Newcastle Central to Bristol Temple Meads direct, a five-hour journey. Spent most of the time listening to Stephen Fry reading *Mythos*, his own interpretation of the tales and legends of Greek Mythology. It is enjoyable.

Duly arrived at Bristol, c.14:39, retrieved bike and got off the train and headed for the way out of the station. Cycled home following NCN 3 route which is a pleasant enough ride once clear of Bristol. It was warm too.

Bristol Temple Meads to West Harptree: 23.25km, 1:25:11, 276m elevation gain (Garmin Edge 520+)

Back home, unloaded bike, removed Tailfin (rear) and Aeroe Frame (front), washed/cleaned bike and put away into the garage. Tent out to dry, other kit hung up to air, and me, into the bath. Then some time to chill and reflect on an excellent few day's.

References:

Carl McKeating and Rachel Crolla, Coast-to-Coast cycling from Ravenglass to South Shields. Published by Cicerone. Guidebook used for the trip.

Geological Society of London. www.geolsoc.org.uk/GeositesHadrian Accessed 18th August 23



The road is alongside Hadrian's Wall from Banks to Birdoswald



Whin Sill



Vindolanda from the boundary wall



Corbridge (Coria), once a thriving town on the northern frontier of the Roman Empire. From AD 85, the Roman army built a series of forts at Corbridge to protect vital crossroads and a bridge. After the last fort was abandoned in the middle of the 2nd century AD, a town prospered for 250 years.





Corbridge Roman town



Corbridge Roman town



Corbridge Roman town



Arbeia Roman fort, South Shields, was founded in about AD 160, the fort guarded the main sea route to Hadrian's Wall. It later became the maritime supply fort for Hadrian's Wall, and was occupied until the Romans left Britain in the 5th century. Partial reconstruction opened in 2000.





Granary CII, Arbeia



Arbeia



River Tyne, Newcastle