

Discover St. Oswald's Way



Sunday 5th August is St. Oswald's day. It is now a year since St. Oswald's Way was opened in August 2006. In Rothbury a brand new wooden sign was erected at the far end of the bridge over the river Coquet. It pointed up the hill towards Whitton and down river. The sign intrigued me and I decided to find out more.

St Oswald's Way is a long distance walking route exploring some of the finest stretches of coast and upland landscapes in the county. From Holy Island in the north, St Oswald's Way follows the coast as far south as Warkworth, before heading up the Coquet valley to Rothbury. The Way then leads south to Heavenfield and Hadrian's Wall, a total distance of 97 miles.

Oswald was a Northumbrian king born in 605. He requested assistance from Iona to help with the conversion of Northumbria to Christianity. He was ably assisted by Aiden who became Bishop of Lindisfarne in 635. Oswald's reign lasted for eight years. It was the start of a remarkable period in Northumbrian history in which scholarship, art and construction flourished. He was killed in a battle in 642.

Holy Island was enveloped in a mantle of grey low-lying cloud when my walking companion Eric and I arrived very early in the morning of Monday 11th June. The car park was empty and the streets leading to the Priory were deserted. It was only after we had ventured far out onto the sands following the poles on the Pilgrim's Way that vehicles began to appear on the Causeway.

Leaving Beal Sands and walking inland we were amazed to find that we had to walk across the tracks of the main railway line. A notice advised us to contact the signalman prior to crossing. Eric telephoned a Network Rail employee in Tweedmouth. The man having ascertained how many were in the party and how long we thought it would take to cross instructed us to cross and report back when were safely on the other side. Eric and I were impressed. Contrasting this experience with that of when we came to cross the frantically busy A1 near Fenwick was illuminating. No traffic island in the middle of the road, no pedestrian crossing. The motorist rules here!

We found a bench in Fenwick and had a break. The attractive section with Kyloe woods was next. A note in the guide book indicated that this was where *Leylandii* cypresses were first raised. The weather improved and the sun came out as we got close to Belford.

The next day some distance beyond Spindleston Heughs we entered the Bamburgh Golf Links in thick mist. At the limit of our visibility a shadowy figure near a golf buggy struck a golf ball in our direction and it bounced harmlessly a few yards away to the right. Well the guide book did mention to be aware of golf balls!

For the next two days we walked south along the beautiful coast to Warkworth. The roar of the breakers kept us company as we walked the firm sands and crossed the rocky headlands. The walk up the Coquet valley through Felton, past Brinkburn Priory to Rothbury was lovely, seemingly endless pastures with rich, lush grass.

South of Rothbury the character of the walk changed completely and we entered a remote and wild area near Coquet Cairn. We saw ravens, oyster catchers flying in tight formation and heard the calls of numerous curlews. In Harwood forest we found magical areas where the wind had blown over the giants of the forest. The trunks and branches of the fallen trees were covered in grey and green moss and great semi-circles of earth were thrown up by the displaced roots.

At one point we stumbled out of the forest into a clearing to find a squad of armed police in body armour crouching behind three police cars confronting a man standing in a farmhouse doorway. Several guns were trained on the man and he was swearing and shouting for the police to leave him alone. It was a real shock but it turned out to be an exercise!

Leaving the forest the way leads across open upland with large fields and rough pasture. Occasionally we walked through a farmstead. Kirkwhelpington was a pleasant surprise. Properties in the village were very tidy with some beautiful well kept gardens and there was a delightful church.

We arrived in Great Bavington on yet another foggy morning with visibility down to less than a hundred yards. In a scene reminiscent of the 19th century the mists wreathed around the quaint buildings and the cobbles in the street were shiny and wet. A large display board told the story of why "Bavington" was "Great"!

At Halton Shields the path joins the Hadrian's Wall Path for the final section to Heavenfield. After the solitude of the sections from Rothbury we were struck by how busy the final segment was. Will the whole of St Oswald's Way ever get that busy?

Our original plan was to take 7 days for the walk rather than the 6 days indicated in the guide. In practice this proved to be a good idea as we had time to focus on things of interest. From the superb scenery to the warm hospitality we found all along the route it was a great experience. Altogether a magnificent insight into today's Northumberland.

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