

## A long walk to Berwick

*The Great Outdoors* magazine, November 2016

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I'd been a long time getting to Berwick: you could reckon it in hours, years or decades, depending where you started from.

Hours: eight. That wasn't bad for 23 miles from Wooler. Years: ten, since I'd set out from Land's End with a vague plan, to walk 800 miles across England, a bit at a time. Decades: six and a bit. I never before had found the excuse to walk through Berwick-upon-Tweed, though I'd shot past it on the train often enough, and it seemed a nice sort of place to go to, with its border history, estuary location and recently-ended war with Russia.

The vagueness of my plan to cross England was very much the point. That unholy trinity of work, family and finance meant that opportunities to get into the great outdoors from my London home were all too limited, essentially just one short break a year, everything else just local lowland walking. I'd got frustrated with cherry-picking different bits of the nation each year – the North Devon Coast one time, the Black Mountains another, say. I was the sort of guy who needed a plan, one that involved a nice B&B at the end of the day. I didn't do spartan.

And that plan, before England, was Wales, starting 2002. I'd walked Offa's Dyke Path a few years before, and it came to me that finding and walking a different, wilder, hillier line across that grand little nation might be fun. Now, there are indeed some very fine ways across Wales, from Sarn Helen to the 'mountain connoisseur's walk' the Cambrian Way. None though was quite right, going to places either that I didn't want to go to or had been to before, mostly Snowdon.

When no tailor-made suit fits, get one custom-cut. I remembered Wainwright's adage, after he had got fed up following another person's route, the Pennine Way. He made his own coast-to-coast and tellingly prefaced it with the indefinite 'a' rather than the insistent 'the'. Don't be "merely followers of other people's routes", he wrote: "there is no end to the possibilities for originality and initiative". What a good prescription.

And so it proved. By 2005 my route had taken me on a B&B string through fine, and often little-visited, parts of Wales, but then, in northern Snowdonia, I had a conundrum. Where was the B&B north of Arenig Fawr? That summit was to be reached at the end of a long day which started at Llanfachreth and climbed Rhobell Fawr as well as high watershed forest between the Mawddach and Lliw. Surely there would be some accommodation near the A road not far beyond? There was not, but there was a bothy by the llyn. I bought myself a Pocket Rocket and gas canister, dug out an ancient sleeping bag, packed my rucksack tighter than ever before, and suddenly there was a whole new world of opportunity.

Later, before crossing the Carneddau on a day when you couldn't actually see the Carneddau, it was time to think about what might lie beyond Wales.

And the answer, with not too much originality, was England. And Scotland. Simultaneously. One in one season, one in another, each year. Our two boys were bigger now, one barely at home, so the modest expansion of 'me time' was not too hard to negotiate. Start? Land's End, narrowly trumping Britain's southernmost point, The Lizard. Finish? Cape Wrath. Starting from one place of tourist tat precluded finishing in another, aka John o'Groats. Via? The border north of Berwick. So the project

began, in the autumn after my 55th birthday, with the idea of finishing before my old-age pension kicked in at 65. I was to be three weeks late.

I knew England's geography much better than Scotland's but even so there was little of the former mapped out in my head beyond a dash up the Cornish coast, turn right for Bodmin Moor, and keep ahead to Dartmoor – I'd walked on neither, but knew and loved the Peak very well and the Dales quite a bit, so I reckoned they would give me similar rewards.

With the South West Coast Path serving well as far as Tintagel, it was a while before I needed to plot my own route in England. This became something of a feature – some stretches on established long-distance paths, others entirely a line of my own choosing. Though it was nice to have the luxury of other people doing the planning and indeed waymarking, the 'own line' stretches felt the more rewarding.

As soon as I was back home from one stretch, I would be down with the maps, working out how to use rights-of-way and the lie of the land to visit places that looked interesting on the map or that I was keen to visit for some reason. The south-west moorland high spots of Brown Willy (alas, the first bad weather – my fault for a rare few days in July) and High Willhays were early obvious targets, and it was good too to have an excuse to visit the famous Tom Cobley pub in Spreyton. The rain came down also on another hill traverse, the Blackdown Hills on the Devon/Somerset border.

For a ten-year plan, taking five years to get as far as Somerset was a bit scary, but the 2010 election came and gave my plans an unintended boost. Almost the first action of the new government was to abolish the public body I worked for, and though it took over a year to get rid of me, by the time of the Olympic year of 2012 I had rather more time on my hands than I might have done. The Cotswold Way followed in one hit, with my wife Barbara joining me for the latter part, and the next year I was back on canals through the Midlands. I deliberately decided to pass through the middle of Birmingham, for I knew it well from work, and north of the city lay Cannock Chase, which sounded – and proved – an interesting area to view.

There were still, though, B&Bs at the end of every day. Nothing in England, yet, to extend those skills which had had that momentary development with Arenig bothy a few years before. Not much, even, in Scotland. Starting from the border a few months after I'd left Land's End, I had cut across the Lammermuirs, gone straight through the centre of Edinburgh (via Arthur's Seat, naturally), and crossed low hills to Callander, then higher ones to Rannoch Moor.

My long-time walking companion Dave Travers travelled up to meet me at Rannoch station in 2010. With all the experience of Arenig behind me, I confidently introduced him to the joys of bothying, by way of a couple of nights at Benalder Cottage, the Munros above on the spare day. This was an excuse to find a way for my route to lead between the stations of Rannoch and Corrour, and return hence on the sleeper train to London. What a glory that was too, in the late springtime light on a day of hail showers and sun, startled deer running by the tracks, lochans dappled across the landscape, the train slowing and lurching over bridges by tumbling burns!

I took my son Adrian back on the return the following spring, so that he could find out what a fine institution the bothy was. Lairig Leathach was the target, and it was much enlivened by three Germans arriving late on *with a bag of coal*. Luckily I had whisky in return. By now, my routine was to mix bothies and B&Bs, but the solidity of four walls was a constant all the way to Achnashellach in 2012.

If the decision to use Arenig bothy in 2005 was one watershed moment, then the glance at the map on my return from Achnashellach was another. North thereof, one could of course choose to walk

from settlement to settlement by coastal roads and passes, but that would flunk any sort of challenge. I'd also merged in to the Cape Wrath Trail, not so much a trail as a state of mind: it was clear I would have to bite the bullet and start wild camping, aged 62.

It's only fair to give *The Great Outdoors* some credit here. I've been a reader of this wonderful magazine for many years – the first issue I saw talked about Coleridge as much as it did Corbetts, and I was hooked. That said, I regarded its writers' exploits as things to be dreamed of rather than emulated. But something of the drip drip of their sheer exultation of being in wild places with total responsibility for getting there and getting out was getting under my skin. Technology helped too. Just at the right time, there was a review of a 1.1kg tent. I thought, tweak my pack a bit and I won't even notice. It wasn't cheap, but I bought it. I sold it to Barbara by dividing the price by a £40 B&B night and coming up with the answer eight.

I did do a little bit of early-spring practice, going up to Snowdonia for a few nights, starting on a valley campsite before a wild camp in the Moelwyns, where I found out what it was like to shake ice off a tent in the morning. The next month, I was on the shores of Loch an Nid below Mullach Coire Mhic Fhearchair, highest of the Fisherfield Six, and wondering why I hadn't done this before. I was about a mile from the place designated by the Ordnance Survey as the most remote in Britain, and the sun was shining across a wild glen, the stern walls of Creag Rainich casting dark just above me.

Having made the investment, it made sense to use the tent in England too. The B&B I'd used in Lichfield the year before, save for one in Ilkley later, proved to be the last, though the bunkhouses and hostels of Hebden Bridge, Bellingham and Wooler have had their part to play, as has my sister's house on the edge of the Yorkshire moors.

A few months after Loch an Nid, I came to the campsite inside Uttoxeter racecourse while a meeting was in full swing, just in time to lose money on the last race. I continued to the White Peak, which was taken by the Limestone Way, but north of Crowden (how does anybody manage there without a tent these days?) I did whatever I could to avoid the Pennine Way, just because I had been there before. I found a trail that linked poet Simon Armitage's Stanza Stones before taking the Dales Way for a bit.

Alas, the Scotland route was polished off too quickly, though with the bonus of the best sunset of my life from Sandwood Bay, only to be bettered by that from Kearvaig bothy the day after – a second sunset, caused by the set sun reflecting from ice crystals in the upper atmosphere. England may not have the same wild camping options, but a site below Great Knoutberry Hill worked well in the Pennines, and another not far below the border fence in the Cheviots.

So, after days on hills like Wild Boar Fell and a stage-break in Appleby, I was ready to take my long-promised route inside High Cup (see *Wild Walks*). Lonely paths across Northumberland followed, with my tent tested in an all-night gale whistling straight through the Tyne gap, before the Pennine Way featured briefly, though I veered off at The Cheviot to cross Hedgehope Hill to Wooler.

And so to Berwick, the last town of a 14-year project to walk 1,400 miles across the three nations of Britain. Only a half-day remained, though walking north on exposed coast with a bitter north wind in one's face is always best when there are only a few miles left. Thus the gap between my England and Scotland walks was closed. Past the final caravan site, Scotland in view, I began to think: I've done alright. There have been no alarms. (OK, one very slightly scary river crossing south of Rhiconich.) I have learnt new skills, though an old dog. And I have the rest of my active life to use them.

At the border fence, I choked with emotion, that I was so late to the party, but had got to the party at all.

## Walks summary

### Across Wales, 2002-06

#### Newport to Llanfairfechan, 213 miles

Hills included Merthyr Common, Pen-y-Fan, Plymlymon, Tarrenhendre, Cadair Idris, Rhobell Fawr, Arenig Fawr, Arenig Fach, Moel Siabod and a traverse of the Carneddau  
Arenig bothy

### Across England, 2006-16

#### Land's End to border north of Berwick, 820 miles

Hills included: high points of Bodmin Moor, Dartmoor, Blackdown Hills, Cotswolds; Bleaklow, Great Knoutberry Hill, Swarth Fell, Wild Boar Fell, Viewing Hill, Round Hill, Flinty Fell, The Dodd (Nentdale), Windy Gyle, The Cheviot, Comb Fell and Hedgehope Hill  
Backside bothy

Wild camps: Artengill and Davidson's Linn, plus 11 public sites

### Across Scotland, 2007-14

#### Border north of Berwick to Cape Wrath, 442 miles

Hills included the western Campsies, Ben Ledi, Benvane, Meall an t-Seallaidh, Creag MacRanaich, Meall nan Tarmachan, Meall Buidhe (Rannoch), Meall na Meoig, Creag a'Mhaim, Druim Shionnach, Sgurr Gaorsaic, Sgurr na Feartaig and Mullach Coire Mhic Fhearchair

Bothies: Benalder Cottage, Invermaillie, Lairig Leacach, Bearnais, Schoolhouse and Kearvaig

Wild camps: Loch an Nid, Clachan, Upper Glen Oykel, Glendhu, Sandwood Bay

## Five places to stay

### Wales

The Eagles, Penmachno LL24 0UG

A bunkhouse above a real ale pub in Snowdonia!

Reached from Arenig bothy, over Arenig Fach and across the Migneint, before heather-bashing above Llyn Conwy. Next day, over to Dolwyddelan before the Daear Ddu ridge to Moel Siabod and down to Capel Curig.

01690 760177, [www.eaglespenmachno.co.uk](http://www.eaglespenmachno.co.uk)

### England

Culm Valley Inn, Culmstock EX15 3JJ

Technically, this is mine now, as I recall winning it in a drinking game with the owner.

Reached by a transitional day through the Exe valley, with the Blackdown Hills to Taunton the next day.

01884 840354, [www.theculmvalleyinn.co.uk](http://www.theculmvalleyinn.co.uk)

Wooler Hostel, Wooler

Just like Youth Hostels used to be (minus the chores), and none the worse for that.

Reached by a wild camp at Davidson's Linn before crossing The Cheviot and Hedgehope Hill, before a long day first to the coast on St Cuthbert's Way and then the Northumberland Coastal Path to

Berwick.

01668 281365, [www.woolerhostel.co.uk](http://www.woolerhostel.co.uk)

### **Scotland**

Allanfauld Farm, Kilsyth G65 9DF

A working farm at the foot of the Campsie Fells, just above a 'Walkers are Welcome' town.

Reached by a stroll along the Forth & Clyde canal, past the Falkirk Wheel. The next day, across the hills to Kippen.

01236 822155, [www.allanfauld.com](http://www.allanfauld.com)

The Byre, Inchnadamph IV27 4HL

In the heart of Assynt, a B&B with private west-facing balcony.

Reached from a wild camp below Ben More Assynt, on my way to another beyond Glendhu bothy.

01571 822213, [www.discoverassynt.co.uk/stay.php](http://www.discoverassynt.co.uk/stay.php)