
WHERE: Northern England, Irish Sea to the North Sea
START/FINISH: Walney Island, Cumbria/Sunderland
DISTANCE: 166 miles (official route 151 miles)
PICTURES: Alamy and Paul Gillingham



GREAT RIDES

WALNEY TO WEAR IN WINTER

*December days are short. This didn't deter CTC member **Paul Gillingham**, son Joseph and friend John from attempting a coast to coast tour*

Winter tours in the UK carry risks. Days are short, colds and 'flu are rampant, and the weather can be appalling. So, on the face of it, a trip across the North of England from the Irish to the North Seas in the first week in December seemed a daft idea. But winter riding has benefits that summer lacks: tourism is nonexistent, smaller roads are empty, fields are newly ploughed, leafless trees reveal their architectural beauty, winter light can be stunning, and you don't always ride in wind, hail or heavy rain. In any case, it was a big birthday for me and I wanted to mark it with a big event.

With me on the ride were cycling buddy John and my son, Joseph, who had flown over from Toronto. We had taken the train from Euston to Barrow-in-Furness. As we left the station in the dark and pedalled towards Walney Island, the wind was rising.

Arriving at the slightly seedy Castle House Hotel facing the Irish Sea, the gale unleashed its fury. It was difficult to stand up. My Claud Butler was slammed against a railing. Later, our hostess at the hotel told us the story of an elderly lady getting out of her car in the car park months before: she was bowled over eight times, breaking bones.

After the storm

We dreaded the next morning, but, amazingly, the storm had dissipated and the thousand windmills out at sea were fairly becalmed and bathed in sunlight. The tide was way out, so rather than following the ritual of dipping our back wheels in the sea

we picked out a pebble each to toss into the North Sea, in the hope that we'd get there.

Just beyond Barrow-in-Furness, we paused to admire the sandstone ruins of Furness Abbey, said to be the second richest abbey in England after Fountains. We had two punctures in the first ten miles, and feeling nervous we bought an extra innertube each at Gills, a bike shop in the pretty village of Ulverston. Round the corner from the shop, we were surprised to pass a sign for the Laurel and Hardy Museum: Ulverston was the birthplace of Stan Laurel.

We were skirting the Lake District. The steep Bigland Hill as we left Penny Bridge was a killer, our first vertical challenge. I usually make it a point of principle never to walk up hills, but John and I succumbed; Joseph, with a young man's legs, sailed up. At Cartmel, a picturesque Cumbrian village, we were tempted to stop for lunch but knew we had to press on to Grange-over-Sands.

Much chastened by the climb up Bigland, we decided to leave the official route for a few miles. Entering the village of Allithwaite, we passed the village postmistress delivering letters and asked her if there was a route that avoided hills. 'Don't come to Cumbria if you don't want hills,' she said.

Four o'clock darkness

In fact, the hills were more down than up. We passed the elegant semis of the Edwardian resort of Grange-over-Sands and headed straight for an atmospheric tea shop for lunch. It was getting on for two o'clock and we knew we had to be in Kendal



DO IT YOURSELF

› We took a morning train from Guildford to Waterloo, cycled to Euston, then took the train to Barrow-in-Furness, followed by a short ride to Walney Island, arriving after dark. From Sunderland, the train took us to King's Cross via Newcastle. We rode to Waterloo, then boarded the train for Guildford, avoiding rush-hour. Bike reservations were needed for the main lines.



» before dark at four. John disappeared and re-joined us five minutes later with a list of taxi firms. 'Just in case,' he said.

The waitress in the café called over the cook, herself a keen cyclist, who confirmed that the road to Kendal was comparatively easy and we'd make it before dark. 'But I have to tell you,' she said 'that a cyclist was killed on the A590 yesterday morning going to work!'

Determined to avoid the A590, we were delighted to find the route out of Grange followed the railway track along the mud flats of Morecombe Bay, before heading north in what turned out to be an easy ride via Gilpin Bridge and Sedgwick.

We made Kendal at 4pm just as it was getting dark and booked into the hostel. We were the only guests and so had a dorm each. The hostel is attached to the Old Brewery Arts Centre, where tables are placed inside old beer vats.

Howgill Fell

The second day's route was from Kendal to Kirkby Stephen. It was a sharp climb out of Kendal and we took a wrong turning, but after a few miles got back on track thanks to the W2W map. The morning was bright and sunny and the distant fells looked magnificent in the winter light.

On a narrow road, we came head to head with a local farmer blocking our way in his 4x4 and stopped to chat. He said cyclists

were a damned nuisance in summer and so were the originators of the W2W route. His farm is on both sides of the road and when he moves his flock of 1,000 sheep or drives his tractor with wide loads through lanes hemmed in by dry-stone walls, there is no passing space.

When we reached the great viaduct at Beck Ford, John decided to take the direct route to Orton for an early lunch. Joseph and I stayed with the W2W trail, weaving along winding roads across fast-flowing becks over ancient packhorse bridges, with the mighty Howgill Fell to our right. It started to rain, which turned to hailstones. On with the capes, but not for long. In front of a roaring fire in the George Inn, Orton, we met up again with John.

It was 2.30 by the time we left the fire and conviviality of the George, so we had one-and-a-half hours to reach Kirkby Stephen before dark. It was only 12 miles, but there were big hills en route. Although we were following the official route, there was no reason not to adapt it to our own purposes. On this basis, John left us at Raisbeck to take a direct route alongside the A685, while Joseph and I stuck to the prescribed route over the magnificent moors.

We reached Kirkby Stephen just before dark and booked into the hostel, a former Methodist chapel, where we were again the only guests. John was up at Croft House, a lovely B&B. After eating, we moved on to The

Black Bull to show the locals how clever we southerners were in the pub quiz. We came second from last.

Over the Pennines

Next morning, we had a slap-up full English – the excuse being that we needed fuel to conquer the cold and the Pennines ahead. We met up with John and set off on the third day's route from Kirkby Stephen to Barnard Castle, which involved the Big One, the five-mile climb up Tan Hill. Green fields gave way to wild moorland, and the higher we got the colder it got, with ice on the road. We were in the Yorkshire Dales National Park and were mightily relieved when we reached the top, marked by Tan Hill Inn, at 1,732 feet the highest pub in the UK.

Inside, a log fire blazed and, apart from a young couple, and the resident dog curled up on the hearth, we were the only customers. We recognised the bartender as a member of the winning pub quiz team who thrashed us the night before. He said we were lucky with the weather. The inn has been cut off because of snow, and a few years ago 30 people were stranded there for four days.

When we arrived at the inn, the heather-clad Pennine moorland was streaked with shafts of sunlight. By the time we left 45 minutes later, after a hearty lunch and a pint of 'Tan Hill Ewe Juice' ale, the sky was black. John's bike had been upended by the wind.

Again there was the pressure of time. Could we make Barnard Castle before dark? The road from Tan Hill was thankfully a long downhill swoop with a following wind, but we were horrified to discover after a few

“GREEN FIELDS GAVE WAY TO WILD MOORLAND, AND THE HIGHER WE GOT THE COLDER IT GOT, WITH ICE ON THE ROAD”



miles that we had failed to notice a turn-off for the 'official' W2W route and would have to go back. John didn't want to, so went on ahead while Joseph and I turned back.

After some tough climbs, Joseph and I eventually reached Barnard Castle as darkness fell just after 4pm. Because of the earlier wrong turning, we weren't able to reach Bowes, where we'd booked for the night, so had to find somewhere in Barnard Castle. My brake blocks had started squealing on the way down from Tan Hill, so I asked a couple of lads where I could find a bike shop. Instead, they suggested Pauline's toyshop just up the road. Sure enough, Pauline had brake blocks. When I asked her where we could find accommodation, a lady in the shop overheard and said 'I've got a nice B&B just around the corner.' Within half an hour we were comfortably installed.

Cycleways to the sea

The next morning, after another full English and a quick visit to the castle, we set off for Durham in heavy rain. But true to form, it soon eased off as we headed north-east for Hamsterley Forest. To enter the forest, the road dropped down to a muddy track, but the surface improved over its four miles to the visitor's centre. Here in the tea shop, we had a wonderful treat of a full beaker of mulled wine and a mince pie, all for £1.

On the road towards Bishop Auckland, the sky darkened and the rain came and went, creating a fantastic double rainbow arching across sunlit fields. On the top of a hill, Joseph was delighted to find a signpost for the village of Toronto. The next section was eight miles off-road along a disused railway

track and then along an intricate route – easily followed thanks to the blue W2W signs – through the back streets of Durham to the city centre, which we reached just before dark at 3.45, to find it heaving with pre-Christmas shoppers.

Next morning was cold but sunny, and the cathedral and castle looked gorgeous. I was hailed by a friendly verger who looked 65 but was actually 80. He'd been a chorister during World War 2 and said the secret of staying youthful was, for him, conducting everything from dance bands to opera. He added that every village in the area once had a coal mine, and mentioned two ex-pupils of The Chorister School who'd avoided going down the mines – Tony Blair and Rowan Atkinson!

Durham is surrounded by hills but our route towards Sunderland followed a tow-path along the river, where rowers were in training for the next Durham Regatta, the 'Henley of the North'. The route then followed miles of muddy track until we reached the suburbs of Sunderland, where traffic-free paths took us through council estates and industrial areas.

The familiar blue W2W route 20 signs led us through the docks – now trendified as the Roker Marina, with sculptures of giant nuts and bolts reflecting past industry – and to our final destination, the Old North Pier and lighthouse at the mouth of the Wear.

Fishing out our pebbles from the Irish Sea, we tossed them into the North Sea, where they landed in unison with a splash. ●

Paul Gillingham is a CTC member. His tour of New Zealand, to celebrate another birthday, was in the Dec 02/Jan 03 issue.

● **Previous page** Sunset from Walney Island, Cumbria. The tide goes out a long way, making wheel-dipping awkward

● **Far left** Journey's end at Wearmouth, after four days of cycling

● **Next left** Conditions on the moors were relatively benign. In recent years, people have been snowed in for days at Tan Hill

● **Immediate left** One benefit of winter touring is that the minor roads the W2W route follows are deserted

Fact File: WALNEY TO WEAR

DISTANCE: 166 miles (official distance is 151 miles), averaging 40 miles per day.

ROUTE: A well-signed route across England from Walney Island on the Irish Sea, crossing the Lake District and the Pennines to Sunderland on the North Sea.

CONDITIONS: The weather threw everything at us except snow: sunny blue skies, gale-force winds, rain and sleet. The roads were mainly country lanes with minimal traffic except for the occasional crossing of A-roads. The off-road tracks were easily manageable on touring bikes.

ACCOMMODATION: A hotel on Walney Island, youth hostels in Kendal and Kirkby Stephen, and B&Bs in Barnard Castle and Durham. (Search for cycle-friendly accommodation at cyclistswelcome.co.uk)

MAP: NCN's Walney to Wear Cycle Route Map (signed W2W 20, now re-signed as 70)

I'M GLAD I HAD: Oilskin cycle cape, ear muffs, a woolly hat, and my bell/compass for when we missed a turning.

NEXT TIME I WOULD... Try the route in other seasons. Finish in Whitby instead of Sunderland. I would also try to build in visits to the Dock Museum in Barrow, the Laurel & Hardy Museum in Ulverston and the Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle.

FURTHER INFO: cyclingW2W.info; or search for 'sustrans walney-wear'

SUSTRANS W2W ROUTE

