

Brackwalks



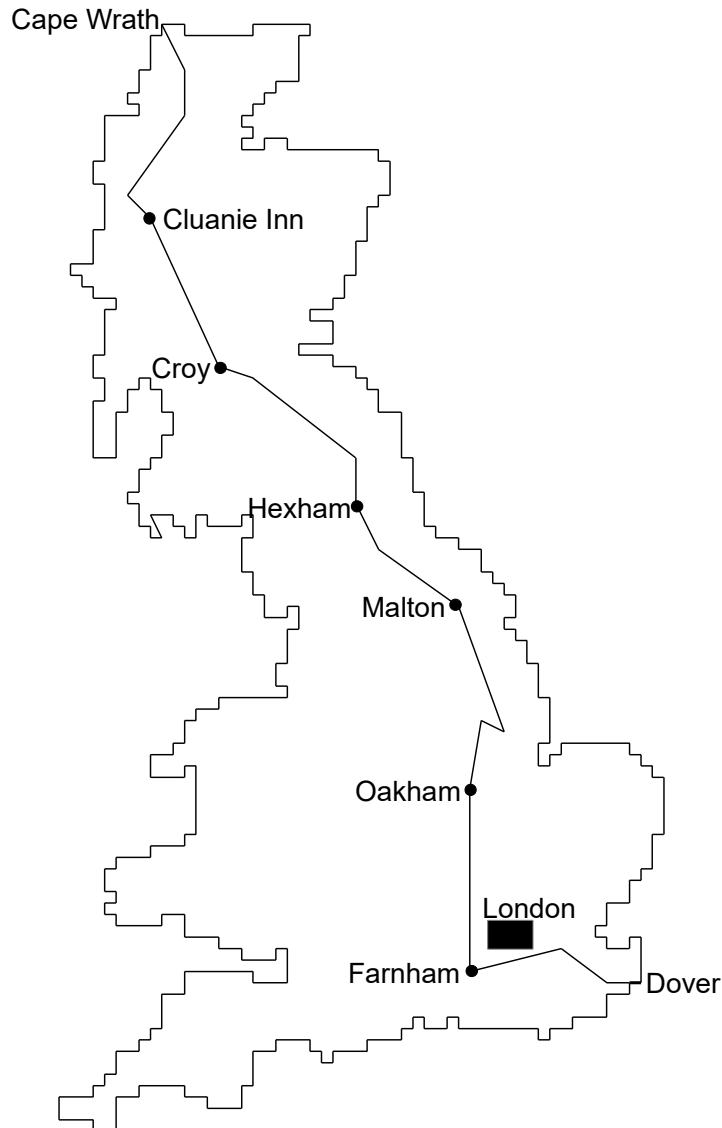
From FORELAND to CAPE

- an end to end walk across Britain from South Foreland (Dover) to Cape Wrath

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Disclaimer: All details are given in good faith. However no activity can be completely hazard-free so undertaking any part of this route is done entirely at your own risk and I accept no responsibility for errors, loss or injury however caused.

Route Overview



Having completed walking from Land's End to John O'Groats, an end to end walk from the most south-easterly point of England to Scotland's north-west extremity seems the obvious successor. Furthermore, this walk was to be done in sections of about two weeks. Thus an important requirement was the ability for the start and finish point of each section to have good transport links. Having stayed westward up to the Scottish border and then gone up the centre of Scotland on the Land's End to John O'Groats walk, the choice for this new trek was to adopt a more easterly route in England followed by a more westerly route through Scotland. Using this approach, coupled with a wish to avoid London, the inland start/end points evolved as Farnham, Oakham, Malton, Hexham, Croy (in Scotland's Central Belt) and the Cluanie Inn in Glen Shiel.

The walk commenced in 2013 and was completed over four years and obviously the route described relates to the conditions found when walked. I was accompanied up to Croy by Gwen, my usual walking companion, but after she got injured Gill took over for the final two sections. I am most grateful to both ladies for their company, suggestions and navigational contributions. Particular thanks are also due to Gwen for her photographic record of this and our other journeys, samples of which can be viewed on the Brackwalks website.

The south-west, north-east and north-west points of mainland Britain are easily determined to be Land's End, Duncansby Head (near John O'Groats) and Cape Wrath. However, the most south-easterly place is not so easily resolved due to the shape of the coastline. By taking a north-east line and using this at points along the south-east coastline, a place where the line does not intersect with land to its south or east identifies the south-east extremity. Thus South Foreland (just up the coast from Dover) just shades it over Dungeness as the most south-easterly point of England and this is the starting point of the walk to Cape Wrath.

The nearest railway station to South Foreland is Martin Mill which has a regular train service from London. It's then a 1.5mile walk into delightful St Margaret's at Cliffe which lies close to the coast and it's a further couple of miles to reach South Foreland's lighthouse. From here the route goes south along the coast to Dover and then joins the North Downs Way (NDW) national trail. The NDW follows the line of the non-continuous chalk ridge of the North Downs. The trail takes in the Kent Downs and the Surrey Hills which are both areas of outstanding natural beauty. The NDW takes walkers in a generally westwards direction, passing to the south of London to reach Farnham on the Surrey/Hampshire border, some thirty six miles south-west of London.

From Farnham, the route turns north but much of the land here is either built-up or is used by the Ministry of Defence. Thus the only viable route northwards is to pick up a local trail named the Blackwater Valley Path which follows the Blackwater River. It has to be said that although this isn't dramatic, it is pleasant, well signed, easy walking. The Blackwater Path is left at Sandhurst in order to follow the Three Castles Path which makes its way via Ascot's racecourse and Windsor Great Park to finish at Windsor Castle. The Path might be indicated on the map but there appears to be no support marking on the ground.

From Windsor, the obvious route choice is to take to the Thames Path national trail and at Marlow there are links to other named trails on the map. Shakespeare's Way was taken as far as Stonor in the Chiltern Hills; again, some of the signing was deficient. The Oxfordshire Way was then joined at Christmas Common as far as Watlington where the Ridgeway national trail was followed to Princes Risborough. From here, there are a number of trails, with many coincident for significant lengths before peeling off. An arbitrary choice saw the Aylesbury Ring used to reach Waddesdon and then the North Bucks Way to reach Whaddon just south-west of Milton Keynes.

Milton Keynes is surprisingly easy to walk through. Being a newly designed town, the roads have been laid out in a vertical and horizontal grid system with each cell containing its own local (village) area. Furthermore, thought has been given to the provision of paths and tracks for walkers and cyclists around the cells, with underpasses and bridges linking cells. There are also areas of parkland and fields making it possible to cross Milton Keynes in virtually any direction on foot or by bike without resorting to roads; this includes getting to and from the railway station enabling this to be used as an alternative or additional section stopping and starting point.

On the way northwards to Oakham in Rutland, the route passes to the east of Northampton with stage stops in the quiet, picturesque villages of Stoke Goldington, Ecton, Harrington and Medbourne. Most of this route is across rural Northamptonshire with a short excursion into Leicestershire before ending in the small county of Rutland, while the countryside passed through progresses from flat to definitely undulating. Perhaps the most surprising and pleasing feature of this part is the attractive villages passed through.

Oakham marks the start of the Viking Way (VW) which takes walkers onwards through Lincolnshire to the Humber Bridge linking Lincolnshire to Yorkshire. There's a general view amongst ramblers that walking in Lincolnshire is boring, so expectations of a good walk tend to be at a fairly low level. However, the walk is truly excellent and imaginative, rewarding the care and thought put into the route planning so as to demonstrate the most interesting features and views of the county. This rural route through arable farmland keeps to the ridges and traverses a substantial section on the western side of the Lincolnshire Wolds between the towns of Horncastle and Caistor. As well as these towns, the VW also passes through the city of Lincoln and takes in the town of Woodhall Spa. A dominant feature of the landscape is the huge size of crop growing fields, with the absence of grazing animals enabling just (large) gaps to be used as field access points. The route cannot be described as direct but it is a walk that is most rewarding and the signing is excellent; in my opinion, this route deserves to be promoted to national trail status. After crossing the Humber Bridge, the route continues (mainly) along the Yorkshire Wolds Way national trail as far as Thixendale. The ascents and descents are noticeably greater north of the Humber! Finally the Centenary Way takes over to reach Malton.

To avoid industrial Tyneside, the route now turns north-west crossing North Yorkshire and County Durham and on into Northumberland to reach the market town of Hexham. From Malton the Centenary and Ebor Ways provide a route into Helmsley and variations on the Cleveland Way national trail are used to cross the North York Moors to beyond Osmotherley where the Coast to Coast route is briefly followed to Ingleby Arncliffe. After, the route crosses the Vale of York making for the River Tees just west of Darlington; this is not a well walked area and the paths are of variable quality with some not do-able. The Teesdale Way loosely follows the line of the River Tees and is definitely not a tame riverside amble. The Teesdale Way is taken beyond Barnard Castle before cutting off north over bleak moorland through Stanhope to the pretty village of Blanchland. From here moorland and field paths lead into the historic large town of Hexham which makes a good start and end point for a walk section.

The Ministry of Defence's Otterburn Ranges occupy a great chunk of territory north of the A68 (with the danger area now extending beyond what is indicated on the 1:25000 map) necessitating a decision as to whether to pass this area to the east or west. Since passing on the west almost inevitably involves taking to the Pennine Way national trail, the easterly route was chosen. From Hexham the route heads for Hadrian's Wall with its national trail path. However, the trail is left for the St Oswald's Way path which itself is only taken as far as the Harwood Forest. From there, the route heads north-west to the small village of

Alwinton at the foot of the Cheviot Hills.

In reaching the sizeable town of Jedburgh, the historic cross-border track called The Street is taken over the Cheviot Hills to the small settlement of Hownam in Scotland. From here, lanes are taken to join the Roman Road of Dere Street which is now largely a track. The route continues through the countryside of the Scottish Borders through the Eildon Hills to Melrose where the Southern Upland Way national trail leads on to Traquair. It's now a short hop on to Peebles and then a drove route to the pretty village of Eddleston. After crossing the Cloich Forest, West Linton is reached and the old drove route of Cauldstane Slap is used to cross the Pentland Hills and descend into East Calder ten miles west of Edinburgh.

The route now traverses Scotland's Central Belt from east to west using the Union Canal to the Falkirk Wheel and then the Forth & Clyde Canal, leaving the latter for Croy Hill with its nearby railway station; Croy is about 12 miles north-east of Glasgow. From Croy the route twists its way northwards crossing the Kilsyth and Gargunnoch Hills to the attractive village of Kippen. The route then turns eastwards to reach the cycle track across Flanders Moss to Aberfoyle at the south end of the Trossachs.

The route continues along the Menteith Hills before dropping to the shore of Loch Venacher and on to Brig o'Turk in the heart of the Trossachs. Hill tracks and paths lead into Strathyre and on to delightful Killin. Beyond Killin, the route goes cross country to lovely, lonely Innerwick in Glen Lyon from where the old Kirk Road (now a track) leads to Loch Rannoch. A hill track leaves beyond the west end of the loch to Corrou which has no road access but does have a regular but infrequent train service! A further hill path and track lead over into Glen Spean and on to Spean Bridge.

A newly created path and lane walking are taken to Gairloch at the southern end of Loch Lochy, enabling the Great Glen Way national trail to be followed to Laggan. The route now turns westwards on forest tracks to Tomdoun. Much of the original drove route from here over to the old droving inn (the Cluanie Inn) in Glen Shiel is no longer feasible due to the construction of Loch Loyne. So the route takes to the hill path which crosses Glen Loyne just west of the loch and continues to meet the original track (which was the Road to the Isles from Inverness). The old drove route emerges on the present day (main) Road to the Isles at the popular, busy and isolated Cluanie Inn in Glen Shiel. Surprisingly, there's an infrequent but regular bus service to and from Inverness which passes its door daily, yielding the escape route back to civilisation.

The final part of the walk to Cape Wrath has the most spectacular scenery. However, it requires the most thought and organisation because the terrain is more remote than other sections and unless camping, organising catered accommodation involves a number of pick-ups/drop-downs from and back to the route. The compensation for this is that it is possible to use the same B&B base for more than one night. There is real choice in a route to reach Cape Wrath. The usual westerly Cape Wrath Trail routes are to my mind tough, involving quite long passages of slogging through pathless, boggy, featureless terrain and the fording of burns and rivers described as 'difficult when in spate'. Having failed to see the appeal of all this, I have gone for a gentler more-easterly western route using paths and tracks. Nevertheless, there are some pathless sections (the minimum I could get away with) and more lane walking than other described routes (although the road walking does not feature heavily and the roads in general are very quiet).

The route goes northwards from Glen Shiel into Glen Affric before turning westwards to Ruarch (hamlet) and Inverinate village. Hill tracks beyond lead over to Killilan and a subsequent hill track over to Attadale and on to Strathcarron village. Glen Carron is

followed to Achnashellach where the track over the Coulin Pass is joined. Once over the pass, a new construction road offers an easy way of reaching the village of Kinlochewe while offering spectacular views of the Torridon mountains. Kinlochewe is the last habitation of any size unless a rest day is taken in (off-route) Ullapool.

Beyond Kinlochewe, the route heads over to Loch a' Bhraoin via the narrow pass of Bealach na Croise and emerges on the quiet main road to Braemore Junction. However before the Junction, the route strikes northwards on paths and tracks along Strath More. The route continues northwards to the path along Strath Nimhe which meets the well-walked track to Oykel Bridge at East Rhidorroch.

It's remarkable that most off-road routes to both John O'Groats and Cape Wrath pass through remote Oykel Bridge with its hotel; however it is a spot where tracks and roads converge on it from most directions. This enables other easier, more-easterly options to Oykel Bridge to be considered; for example see my 'Walking e2e' book for a route that could be used from Peebles, West Linton or Fort Augustus.

The River Oykel is followed north-westwards to Loch Ailsh before striking northwards on an old track (with spectacular views of the Assynt mountains) to emerge far up Glen Cassley. A power station access lane ensues which crosses the north end of Loch Shin to reach the Lairg road. There's easy walking along an old miner's track to Gobernuisgach Lodge. Here, a good track with spectacular views branches off through Glen Golly and over to Loch Dionard. Beyond the loch, there's a good track along Strath Dionard to the Durness main road at Gualin House.

Unusually, the route now makes for the west side of the Kyle of Durness, using footbridges to cross the River Dionard and the Grudie River. The west side of the Kyle is then followed to reach and follow the track through MoD territory (on a non-firing day) to the iconic lighthouse at Cape Wrath marking the end point of the south-east to north-west walk. It then only remains to take the minibus back to the Kyle for the ferry crossing back to the Durness side. Returning home is relatively easy as Durness has a weekday bus that runs to Lairg railway station in time for the mid-morning train to Inverness and a Saturday bus which arrives in Inverness late morning.