

Ravenglass to South Shields along Hadrian's Cycleway 29 September – 1 October:

Dr David and Mrs Barbara Newcombe, Cambridge

The Plan

This ride was always going to be our holiday this year so we didn't want to spend it speeding along like mad things. We chose to do the route in four days. We planned to cover a reasonable distance on Days One and Two from Ravenglass to Brampton. Knowing that the stiffer climbs and many of the Roman sites of interest would be on the road from Brampton to Hexham, we chose to do a shorter Day Three cycling and sightseeing, and then finishing with a longer but easy Day Four to South Shields.

We left Cambridge on Saturday, 27 September at 8 am for the seven hour train ride to Ravenglass. The weather in Cambridge was cold and very foggy which we hoped was not an omen. There is usually no problem taking bicycles on the train but it is necessary to remember to book the bikes when buying tickets. On the local train there are usually specific cars with spaces to put cycles and this can sometimes be a bit awkward if the train is crowded. The intercity trains are no problem as long as the bikes are booked. We had no problem taking the bikes on the train at this off-peak time and the train guards were extremely helpful.

Arriving in Ravenglass, we took a right out of the station and cycled briefly uphill, taking another right past the caravan park. About 500 yards up a private road is the Roman Bath House that marks the beginning of the west to east route. From here we made our way to the Rosegarth Guest House (<http://www.rose-garth.co.uk/>). Right on the water, this is an extremely nice guesthouse and we highly recommend it. Dinner options in Ravenglass are a bit limited but the Ratty Arms is a good, cheap option and very busy. The Pennington Hotel serves very good food but a bit pricey.



At the Start of NCN 72

Day One – Ravenglass to Siloth

A good breakfast and we were away by 09.20. If you are coming down from the Bath House, watch carefully for the NCN 72 sign, it is hidden from the road. Take a hard right after the bridge and follow the foot/cycle path along the water's edge. While the cycleway is mostly flat there are a few surprises but these are not difficult at all. We lost the cycleway after Sellafield and added a mile or two while we tried to find it again. Much of this day was spent cycling along some



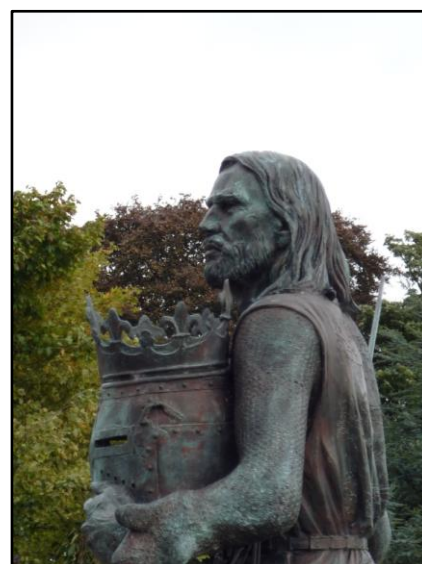
Coastal path outside of Ravenglass

really terrific off-road paths – the sections between Egremont and Workington are particularly outstanding. Please note that it may be difficult to find the tunnel to cross under the railroad at Flimby - had we not seen the picture of this new and improved underpass on the Hadrian's Cycleway website, we would have missed it. We found some lovely cycling between Maryport and Siloth, much of it on farm track. There is a long section of busy road out of Maryport but we found that drivers were aware and cautious of cyclists.

In all a good day. We arrived at the Nith View Guest House in Siloth (<http://nithview-guesthouse.co.uk/>) after about five hours of cycling. Our mileage was 56.9 miles (reflecting getting lost near Sellafield). The accommodation was good and we had dinner at the Golf Hotel which is just about the only option in town. NB: the Nith View does not accept cards at the moment so have cash ready.

Day Two – Siloth to Brampton

Day Two and the weather still held fine: clear and cool with rain predicted for later. Crucially, the wind was from the west. Leaving Siloth we were directed to a quieter road out of town along the Skinburness Road which is not on the official cycleway. This added a little over two miles to the journey but there was no traffic and we cycled right past a bizarre, derelict hotel that looked like something out of a Stephen King novel. We cycled into a stiff headwind from Whiting to Cardunock but after this we had a following wind all the way into Carlisle. The off road track in Carlisle was a bit muddy and slow going but beautiful by the river. We had some heavy rain outside of Carlisle but this cleared



Edward I at Burgh by Sands

reasonably quickly. Be careful at Hayton where there is not a NCN 72 marker on the signpost at the junction: do not turn left toward Brampton but carry on straight – we made this mistake and added an unnecessary mile to our journey by turning here. There are some climbs into Brampton.

Stayed at Sands House in Brampton (<http://www.thesandshouse.co.uk/>) which is a comfortable B&B about ¼ of a mile from the centre of town. Ate a solid, traditional pub meal at the White Lion which was exactly what we needed. We covered 54 miles in well under five hours without pushing it.

Day Three – Brampton to Hexham

The day began with a light but persistent drizzle that soon became heavy rain: a very cold, very windy and very wet day. The climbs up to the military road are steep but once up on the ridge the ride is beautiful. Stopped at the ancient Roman fort at Birdoswald (<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/server.php?show=nav.13613>), had a coffee and an opportunity to dry off a bit. Some miles later we stopped at the archaeological site at Vindolanda (<http://www.vindolanda.com/>) had lunch

and tried to dry off again. Despite the rain and wind, the scenery was fantastic and the climbs certainly kept us warm. Because the weather was so wet and there were so many leaves on



The Wall



The High Point - Lovely Weather

the roads, we were unable to enjoy fully the long downhill sections but these came as a relief after the climbs of the day.

We spent about four hours in making the 38 miles we travelled today but we less interested in speed than in enjoying the ride and not killing ourselves. Stayed at the County Hotel (<http://www.thecountyhexham.co.uk/>) which was Ok but unfortunately we had a pretty dodgy shower in our room and a good shower was something we both wanted after a tough day. The owner also seems to have a thing

for ceramic chickens. However, the weather cleared late in the afternoon and we enjoyed an interesting walk around historic Hexham and a fine meal at Vercelli's in the town centre.

Day Four – Hexham to South Shields

The weather improved and was cool and clear this morning., the wind was brisk and out of the northwest. We took our time today and enjoyed a leisurely ride along the river to Newcastle. Many cyclists were out for the day – all going in the other direction! We had not seen any other cyclists since Whitehaven where we encountered a sponsored cycle along the C2C route (next year's project!), so it was nice to see others out enjoying the autumnal weather. Arrived in Newcastle and



Hadrian himself

found our way onto the Quayside but did find the way not well marked for a short section after this. The 11 miles from Quayside was a bit tedious but had the advantage of being mostly off road. We chose to take the ferry across the river and made our way to Arbeia which is a curious little place. We decided to take the NCN 14 back to the Millennium Bridge as a different return to Newcastle but got hopelessly lost in Jarrow. We did manage finally to find the pedestrian/cycle tunnel under the river and rejoined NCN 72. A

subsequent conversation with a guy in the tourist information office on the

Quayside revealed that NCN 14 is not easy to maintain because of fly-tipping and for other reasons. We simply found it largely unmarked and very busy. The return journey was not helped by the stiff headwind that had blown us into Arbeia. Overall, however, the weather on the last day was a treat and we dragged our feet a little to try to make the whole thing last a bit longer. We were on the road for about 5 hours and covered about 50 miles including the return to Newcastle.

Overall Impression

We highly recommend this trip and doing it in four days gives the opportunity to stop and enjoy some of the amazing sights there are to see along the way. The sign posting for NCN 72 is mostly OK although in some places the signs are either obscured or (very occasionally) vandalised. There are some sections of the route where a 'Don't Panic. You're still on 72'



Journey's End - Arbeia



The Archway

notice would be nice but most of the important junctions are well marked. We took a couple of wrong turnings but this may have been as much to do with looking at the scenery and not paying attention to the markings.

The top B&B was the Rosegarth in Ravenglass and the Nith View, Silloth and Sands House, Brampton were next.

From Door to Door we cycled 208.5 miles in 20 hours and 41 minutes. Our top speed (owing to very wet roads) was 29 mph and we averaged a little over 10 mph. Yes, we did have to get off and push several times – next time we will travel lighter!!!! There is no good reason why cyclists of any age can't do this ride if they take their time and are reasonably fit.