

Walk the Way in a Day

Walk 16 River South Tyne and Alston

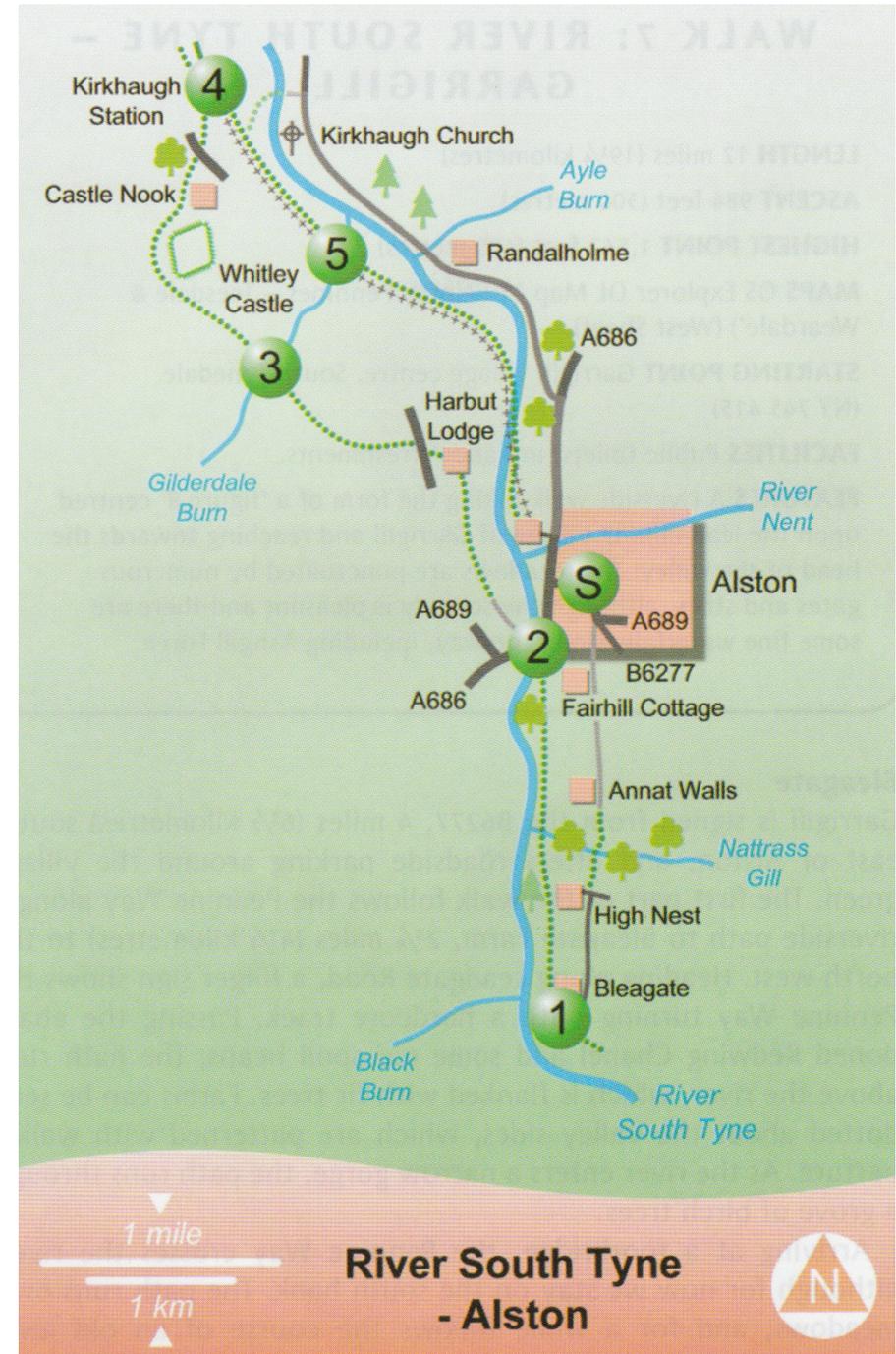
Another walk taking the form of a 'figure 8', this time centred upon England's highest market town. Crossing valley side pasture and passing the remains of a Roman fort (Whitley Castle), the return route runs alongside a narrow gauge railway. The paths can be muddy, but the views are lovely.



- Length: 9½ miles (15¼ kilometres)
- Ascent: 722 feet (220 metres)
- Highest Point: 1,116 feet (340 metres)
- Map(s): OS Explorer OL Map 31 ('North Pennines - Teesdale & Weardale') (West Sheet)
- Starting Point: Market Cross, Alston town centre (NY 719 464)
- Facilities: Full range of services.
- Website: <http://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/pennine-way/route/walk-way-day-walk-16-river-south-tyne-and-alston>

Nattrass Gill

Alston is located at the crossroads of the A686 (Haydon Bridge to Penrith) and A689 (Brampton to Bishop Auckland) trans-Pennine routes. There is a parking area in the marketplace, although this is often busy with shoppers, so it might be better to park elsewhere (note that the car park at the old railway station is locked at nightfall). The first part of the walk runs south along the valley side for 2 miles (3 kilometres) to join the Pennine Way at Bleagate farm. Starting at the market cross, head along the cobbled main street (A689). Just before the junction with the B6277, a finger sign marks the start of a path to Nattrass Gill, heading along an alleyway beside St. Paul's Mission.



Alston

At around 950 feet (290 metres) above sea level, Alston ('Alden's town') competes with Buxton in the Peak District for the dubious honour of being England's highest market town. A licensed market has been held here since 1154, serving the mines on Alston Moor. Lead was extensively mined from the early 12th century, and locally produced silver was sufficient to support a Royal Mint at Carlisle. The cobbled main street is home to a distinctive market cross, donated by Sir William Stephenson of Crosslands farm, who became Lord Mayor of London in 1764. Charles Dickens visited Alston in 1838 while researching his novel 'Nicholas Nickleby'. Today the town is known as the home of Cumberland Mustard and Alston Cheese.

Another finger sign points along a walled lane running past Fairhill Cottage, with the view ahead dominated by Cross Fell. From Annat Walls farm a path runs along the edge of a field before dropping into a beautiful dene - Nattrass Gill - where the stream is crossed by a footbridge. Heading up a stepped path, a side-stream is crossed by another bridge. Continuing across fields towards High Nest farm, turn onto an access road signed for Bleagate farm, where the Pennine Way joins from the left (1 = NY 717 437).

Firs Wood

The next part of the walk follows the Pennine Way back to Alston. Passing through the farmyard, cross a step stile and turn right. Heading north across meadows, the river is off to the left, screened by larch and fir-trees. Re-crossing Nattrass Gill, the path eventually enters Firs Wood, where there is a choice of ways. The Pennine Way continues straight ahead, while another route heads down the valley side to join a riverside path. Passing the youth hostel, the path arrives at the A686 river crossing (2 = NY 716 461).

Whitley Castle

From here the walk follows the Pennine Way north-west to Kirkhaugh. Just over the bridge, close to a war memorial, a finger sign shows the route turning onto a hardcore track. A path runs down the side of a white-washed farmhouse before continuing over pasture towards Harbut Lodge. Passing to the left of the hall, which stands in parkland dotted with horse chestnut trees, a driveway leads to the A689. A short way along the road, a finger sign shows the route crossing a ladder stile, passing to the right of a barn before heading uphill on a rough track. Following a drystone wall to the top corner of a field, ignore a gated lane and instead cross over a step stile. Heading north-west over rushy ground, the path eventually drops into the valley of Gilderdale Burn, which is crossed by a footbridge (3 = NY 698 479).

Continuing north-west over rough pasture, a muddy track is soon joined. The grassy ramparts of Whitley Castle are off to the right as the track swings around to head north-east. Over a drystone wall by a ladder stile, the route continues downhill, to the right of a gully. Dropping down to cross the stream by a footbridge, the path threads through a thicket of birch trees to arrive back at the A689. Re-crossing the road, the route continues over fields, passing to the left of a belt of fir-trees, then to the right of Dyke House farm. Eventually a makeshift sign marks a right turn, down towards Kirkhaugh Station, where we leave the Pennine Way (4 = NY 696 496).

Whitley Castle

Whitley Castle is the popular name for the Roman fort of Epiacum, which is connected with that of the Gaulish deity, Epona. It stands on the course of Maiden Way, which crosses over the Pennine ridge, connecting Kirkby Thore (Bravoniacum) and Carvoran (Magnis). The fort was built during Agricola's governorship to an unusual diamond-shaped plan, protected by a system of four ditches on three of its sides. To the west, where it is over-looked by higher ground, there are no less than seven ditches.

South Tyne Trail

Crossing a hump-back bridge, turn right and head down to the railway terminus, from where there are two routes back to Alston. The first and most straightforward is to follow the South Tyne Trail as it runs alongside the railway, 2½ miles (4¼ kilometres) back to Alston Station. The path is uncomfortably narrow, but the scenery is lovely. Crossing the dene of Gilderdale Burn by a viaduct, a sign marks the boundary between Cumberland and Northumberland (5 = NY 703 486). The River South Tyne is crossed near Harbut Lodge, before the path passes through a picnic place to arrive at the station.

Alternatively, there is the option of a pleasant road-walk back to the starting point. Over a fence stile at the south end of the station, head down towards the river, which is crossed by a footbridge. A hardcore track leads to an unclassified road, which is followed past Kirkhaugh Church, with its slender spire. The wooded valley side is home to red squirrels. Arriving at Randalholm Bridge, the farm is built around a well-preserved peel tower. As the road gains height it veers away from the river. Arriving at the junction with the A686, follow the pavement down towards Alston.

This walk is reproduced with permission from Circular Walks on the Pennine Way by Kevin Donkin, published by Frances Lincoln.