

A Stroll with St Cuthbert

On Holiday From The Garden.

In the middle of the 1990s in the days when we visited dog shows with our two Basset Hounds, we stopped one evening at Harestanes Country Park, near Jedburgh, to stretch our legs. We had been to a dog show down south and were on our way home to Shieldhill. In the visitor centre we found a leaflet that was advertising a new long-distance walk, The St Cuthbert's Way. This walk, that is 60miles/100k long, takes in existing Border paths, bits of the Southern Uplands Way and a little bit of the Pennine Way.

When the children were young, we did quite a bit of hill walking and so were used to walking although we had never taken part in anything that required walking a long distance on successive days. However, my daughter and I decided that this distance would not take more than a week to complete and would be good experience for when we got around to walking one of the longer path networks.

Why should St Cuthbert have a path that traverses the Cheviot Hills, beginning in Melrose and ending on The Holy Isle in Lindisfarne? Who was this man? Not much is known about Cuthbert's birth but he was fostered to a widow by the name of Kenswith. She lived in a place called Hruringham, this was possibly near the area known as Old Melrose. When he was a boy, he tended sheep on the hills around Melrose. In those days talk of religion was part of daily conversation and Cuthbert would have been party to this. Cuthbert travelled around a bit at this time too, living on meagre rations and living with a band of warriors, crossing moorland, sheltering wherever they could. By the time that he reached Tyneside, he was a Christian.

He joined the monastery in Melrose and, it was when he was here, he heard of the Death of Aiden, the Abbot of Lindisfarne. He vowed to continue Aiden's work in bringing Christianity to Northumbria. After Aida's death, Cuthbert became Abbot of Holy Isle in 661.

Cuthbert had a reputation of being a healer and able to perform miracles and so people flocked to see him. He preferred a quiet life and to be left in solitude. He left Lindisfarne and lived as a hermit on a rocky isle near to the coast. This rock is known as St Cuthbert's Rock. He was not left in solitude and he returned to Lindisfarne for a time and became its bishop. He ended days on Inner Farne and died round about 687AD. He was buried on The Hoy Isle. The Vikings raids of Holy Isle began in 793AD. The monks feared for the safety of St Cuthbert's remains and so they fled The Holy Isle, takin St Cuthbert's bones with them. They travelled around the North East of England finally

stopping in Durham. Today you can visit St Cuthbert's tomb in Durham Cathedral.

We began our walk in Melrose. The St Cuthbert's Way begins with a steep set of steps that take you to the foot of the Eildon Hills. The three hills that make up this group can be seen from all over the area. If you look in this direction, after you cross the border into Southern Scotland you can see The Eildons.

There was a Roman signalling point on the top of the highest one. I learned on that particular morning, steps are harder to climb up that plain hillside and do not indulge in a full Scottish breakfast before tackling such a hard climb.

This was the first leg of our journey that took us from Melrose to Ancrum.

We were accompanied on our stretch along the River Tweed by the NATO's aeroplanes diving low over the river.

In those days there was a lady who had a bed breakfast facility on the edge of the A68. There was a path from Dere Street into her garden that was there for the use of guests and this was welcomed by footsore walkers. Her rooms were full that night with walkers all walking bits of the St Cuthbert's way. She put us out to catch a bus that took us into Ancrum. We had dinner in the pub-main course only because we had to catch the bus back to our digs. We had to get a bus the next morning that took us to a bus stop that I suppose is there for visitors to Harestanes Country Park but also our path continued behind the bus shelter. There was a foot bridge that we should have crossed but it had been washed away in a storm and the detour was rather long.

We had sunny, warm weather and we removed stuff from our day bags into our suitcases until, by the end of our walk, we just had water and a food in our bag. We enlisted the help of, I think a very nice young man; we never met him. His company was called Carry Light and he collected our suitcases and always had them waiting for us at our next day's bed and breakfast. He also left messages of encouragement on our luggage labels.

Day two took us from Ancrum to Kirk Yetholm. This was one of our hottest days. The tomato in our cheeses and tomato sandwiches had just disintegrated. This was also the hardest stretch because we had quite a long 'on road' stretch into Morebattle. The regional council was still trying to get agreements with one landowner to allow them to take a path through his land. We also had our hardest hill climb over the hill to Kirk Yetholm. Lesley got sunburnt that day; although she had plastered on sun screen. I got blisters on the soles of my feet. On hind sight I should have worn trainers for the road section. That was also the longest section, 19 miles. Our land lady for the night sent her Pembrokeshire Corgi to the end of her drive to look for us. This wonderful lady gave Lesley soothing cream for her sunburn and gave us tea and Turkish

delight, from Turkey. We then had the most delicious casserole for dinner. She was ever so upset that we declined tomato in our sandwiches next morning. From Kirk Yetholm we crossed the border and crossed over more hills to end up in Wooler.

In the hills above Wooler, there is the iron age hill fort of Yeavering Bell. The residents of this fort would have had a clear view of anyone coming from miles around. The boundary is clear to see with the lumps and bumps of the buildings.

We passed the bus station as we walked to our bed and breakfast accommodation. A fleeting desire almost made us turn in and collect a timetable.

After our meal that night we worked out our timetable for the next day because our next stop was Lindisfarne. We needed to cross the causeway before high tide.

The last day was exceptionally warm. We passed by and rested in St Cuthbert's cave. It was cool, shady and a pleasant place to eat our lunch. It is thought that the monks rested here with his body.

Then it was on to what could be the most dangerous bit of our walk. We had to cross the A1. We did that in two halves, there being a grassy bit in the middle. That is followed by the East Coast railway line. We did this crossing carefully, quickly, listening all the time. I believe today there is a telephone, one that is connected somewhere useful. They tell you when it is safe to cross, There is a telephone on the other side of the line, I suppose this is to let them know that you have made it.

We arrived at the end of the causeway with plenty of time left to cross. I have never been so pleased to see a scruffy, red caravan that was selling ice creams and lollies. We got a lolly each and relaxed. I think that it took us almost as long to cross the causeway as it did to do the rest of that last stretch of path. The ice lollies ran up our arms. The sand blew and stuck to our chins and arms. We staggered into the Lindisfarne Hotel and the receptionist just said, "Would you like me to hold dinner until 7.30?"

I would like to do this walk again, but taking more time. We had to dig deep when we were in Wooler. We were footsore and tired. The St Cuthbert's way passes through interesting countryside and it would be nice to spend more time in some of the little towns. The St Cuthbert's Way has a web site and there is a company that organises your trip. I think that there are two bag carrying companies today.

There still is no foot crossing over neither the A1 nor the East coast railway line. Lesley and I have never got around to doing any of the longer footpaths.