

Walks The Butter Stone

Walk information

Distance: 7.6 km (4.75 miles)

Time: 2 hours

Maps: OS Explorer OL 31 'North Pennines'

Parking: On-street parking throughout Cotherstone

Refreshments: Pubs at Cotherstone; no facilities en route.

How to get there: Cotherstone lies on the B6277 between Barnard Castle and Middleton-in-Teesdale

Terrain: Tees Railway Walk leads from Cotherstone to Balder Viaduct, then field paths and farm tracks lead up to the open moorland beyond Cuckoo Farm. After a short section of indistinct footpath, a clear grassy track leads across this grassy moorland to reach the Butter Stone from where an unenclosed road leads back towards Cotherstone, with field paths and the Railway Walk to finish.

Caution: Some paths are muddy and slippery underfoot. There are a couple of streams to cross, which may be difficult after heavy rain. The path from Cuckoo Farm to the Butter Stone is indistinct in places, with boggy and rough moorland as well as several bridges made from old railway sleepers, which are slippery when wet. This walk includes road walking at the start and end of the walk.

Points of interest

COTHERSTONE is a lovely village set in the heart of Teesdale, with old cottages, pubs and a small village green. Just to the north of the village overlooking the confluence of the rivers Tees and Balder are the remains of Cotherstone Castle. Built in the late 11th Century by the Fitzhughs family of Ravensworth, this motte and bailey castle was soon destroyed by Scottish invaders and is now little more than ditches in a field set high above the river. From Cotherstone, our route follows the track-bed of the former Darlington to Middleton-in-Teesdale railway. This railway opened in 1868, originally to connect Barnard

Castle and Alston although the railway only reached Middleton-in-Teesdale. The line closed in 1964 and much of it now forms the Tees Railway Walk. The highlight of this section is the nine-arched Balder Viaduct that spans the deep wooded gorge of Baldersdale. Just beyond the viaduct, our route cuts off across fields before dropping down to reach a footbridge across the river, set in the heart of this wooded gorge. Field paths and farm tracks then lead up onto the edge of Cotherstone Moor. This moorland is criss-crossed with old tracks, bridleways and more modern roads. Just beside the road stands the historic Butter Stone, which is situated at the junction of old routes to Cotherstone, Barnard Castle, Bowes and Baldersdale. This solitary stone has a sad tale to tell for during the 1660s plague struck the people of Barnard Castle. To avoid spreading the disease to the surrounding farms and villages, the people of Barnard Castle would come up onto this moorland and leave money on this stone in return for dairy produce left by local farmers, thus avoiding direct contact with each other. When I visited this stone there were some coins left on top of it. It is a thought-provoking place. What pain and terror must those poor souls have endured during the terrible months and years the plague cast its dark shadow over Teesdale, visiting this lonely spot to exchange money for produce.

The walk

1 From Cotherstone village green, follow the main road through the village towards Barnard Castle (passing the village green on your left) then, where the main road bends left at the top of the village green, take the turning to the right towards 'Bowes'. Follow this road up passing St Cuthbert's Church and out of the village then, about 100 metres beyond the last houses, turn right along a track and through a gate along the Tees Railway Walk (old railway track-bed). Follow this old railway line straight on for 1.5 km to reach a road across your path (with West Park Farm just across to

your right). Cross over this road and carry straight on along the old railway track-bed (sign 'Tees Railway Walk, Romalldkirk') to soon reach Balder Viaduct across a spectacular wooded gorge. Cross this viaduct and continue straight on along the old railway track-bed for 75 metres then turn left through a kissing-gate that leads out onto a field.

2 After the kissing-gate, head straight across the field to reach a gate in a fence to your left at the end of this field (near where this fence joins the bottom end of a wall). Head through the gate to join a farm lane just beyond. Turn left along this lane, over a small stream then gently rising up across the middle of the field. Just before you reach a gate and wall across the track (by a solitary tree to your right), bear left off the track heading across the field (no path) then dropping down to join the wall/fence on your right which you follow quite steeply down into the wooded Balder valley to reach a stile in the bottom corner of the field (just above the wooded riverbanks). Cross the stile and drop down through woodland to a footbridge across the river, after which follow the path to the right heading up across the steep wooded riverbank, over a dilapidated stile across a broken fence then carry on slanting up across the bank to soon reach the corner of a fence on your left at the top of the wooded bank (with the side-stream of Osmond Beck to your right in a deep ravine). Follow this fence straight on (fence on your left and Osmond Beck to your right) to reach a road beside a

road-bridge across Osmond Beck (waterfall). Turn left along the road for a few paces then right along the farm track (signpost) and follow this lane up heading towards the left-hand side of Corn Park South Farm. Follow the track skirting to the left around the farm buildings then, where the track bends to the right into the farmyard, turn left through a metal gate (waymarker). After the gate, follow the rutted track straight on across the field and down to reach another metal gate at the bottom of the field, after which follow the track bending sharp right through another gate, over a small stream then gently rising up alongside the field boundary on your right to reach a choice of two gates at the top of this field. Carry straight on through the right-hand gate and follow the rutted track gently rising up alongside the field boundary on your left to reach the small isolated Cuckoo Farm on your left. Carry straight on passing Cuckoo Farm on your left to quickly reach a gate in a wall in the top left-hand corner of the field (copse of woodland on your left) that leads out onto open grassy moorland.

3 Head through the gate and walk straight on to quickly reach a grassy track across your path – carry straight on across the open grassy moorland (heading south) along an indistinct path for about 100 metres down to reach a footbridge (railway sleepers) across Burble Beck set in a shallow valley. Cross the bridge (caution: slippery) and carry straight on along the narrow path for another

100 metres to reach another small stream set in a very shallow valley, after which follow the path rising up ahead bearing very slightly left across the grassy moorland for a further 100 metres to reach a clear, grassy track across your path (set in the more pronounced valley of Crook Beck). Turn left along this track, over a ford across Crook Beck then follow the grassy track straight on across the moorland (leaving Crook Beck to bend away to the left) for 800 metres to reach the road. As you approach the road, the path forks – follow the left-hand path to quickly reach the solitary Butter Stone just beyond which you join the road.

4 Turn left along the unfenced road (walk on the moorland verge) and follow it down heading back towards Cotherstone for 1 km then, as you come to the end of the rough grassland on the right-hand side of the road (as the walls close in) take the path to the left over a wall-stile (signpost) just after the entrance to Pinners Cottage. Cross the wall-stile and follow the path straight on through woodland, over a stone-slab footbridge across Crook Beck then up over a stile, then continue straight on along the enclosed path (woodland on your right) to reach a small gate that leads out onto a field. After the gate, walk straight across the middle of the field to reach a stile beside a gate in a hedge, after which carry straight on across the middle of the next field to reach a wall-stile, then continue straight on across the next small field and up a ladder stile back onto the Tees Railway Walk. Turn right along the old railway track-bed and follow this back to join the road on the outskirts of Cotherstone.

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Birdwatch By Ian Kerr

A good run of rarities, ranging from some of our smallest species to one of the world's largest seabirds, an adult black-browed albatross, *pictured*, has made the past week the most exciting so far this spring.

Very few albatross ever appear in the northern hemisphere but when they do they are almost inevitably black-browed, which breed on South Atlantic islands. One flew south off Thornwick Bay and Bempton Cliffs on Sunday. Then, amazingly, it returned to give another flypast, this time close in-shore, on Tuesday. Back on May 4 there was a

similar sighting off Berwick. It's intriguing to think that it has probably been out there somewhere beyond the range of our keenest sea-watchers in the intervening period.

The past week has also produced several typical late spring "overshoots" from the Mediterranean and Southern Europe as well as some good species from Siberia and Northern and Eastern Europe. The "overshoots" included a typically showy hoopoe at Burniston. A serin, a small green member of the finch family, turned up on the Farne Islands. There were also sightings of a red-

rumped swallow, another typical Mediterranean breeder and far north of its normal range. It's impossible to tell if the sightings involved the same bird as it moved up and down the coast. The first sighting was from Whitburn and was followed by other brief glimpses on the Snook on Holy Islands and later at Druridge Pools. The short-toed lark, another typical southern European species, continued to be reported until the weekend at Catton in south west Northumberland.

Among Siberian, eastern and northern species were two extremely rare wagtails. A grey-headed wagtail was at Burniston

and a bright sub-adult citrine wagtail fed along the muddy edges at Lynemouth Flash. A tawny pipit was at Burniston and a probable red-throated pipit flew north at Saltburn.

The most unexpected of the small rarities was a singing yellow-browed warbler on Holy Island. These tiny Siberian "gems" are rare but very regular autumn visitors along the coast when most birders can expect to enjoy one or two. But they are extremely rare in spring and even more unusual when they are singing. Yellow-browed warblers have been known to winter in Britain and it's possible that this

bird had done so. It sang well over a period of several hours in an island garden.

Rarer waders included seven dotterel at Danby Beacon, one of the region's few regular spring sites for this species. Among our rarest summering species, now with just a toehold in the region, was a turtle dove found at Eaglescliffe

