

Walks Cockfield Fell

Walk information

Distance: 5.2 km (3.25 miles)

Time: 2 hours

Maps: OS Explorer 305 – always take a map on your walk

Start/Parking: On-street parking throughout Cockfield

Refreshments: Pubs and shops at Cockfield

Terrain: Grassy paths across Cockfield Fell and alongside the River Gaunless all the way, with a short section of road walking. Rough and muddy terrain in places, with some slopes.

How to get there: From the A688 just to the north of Staindrop, follow a minor road heading north-west to reach Cockfield.

Caution: Cockfield Fell has many abandoned workings, shafts and old coal mines – keep to the paths. There are animals on the fell; keep dogs under control. Some of the paths are muddy/wet underfoot. Take care walking along the roads.

Points of interest

COCKFIELD is a long village of stone houses and cottages set back behind a narrow village green along a sloping road. There is a real sense of village life here, with traditional shops and a bustling atmosphere. Cockfield was the birthplace of Jeremiah Dixon, world-renowned 18th Century cartography and astronomer – look out for the information board on the green.

Cockfield Fell stands as England's largest Scheduled Ancient Monument and is a truly fascinating place to explore. This rough hillside is a mass of grass-covered mounds and bumps with overgrown tracks, wagon-ways, tramways and two former railway lines. Cockfield Fell boasts some of the earliest coal workings in England dating back to at least the 14th Century when they were worked for the Bishop of Durham as well as a large whinstone quarry and remains of earlier horse-drawn

tramways for the transportation of coal that may date back to the 16th Century. It is also littered with Iron Age farming systems, settlements and enclosures that indicate this hillside has been exploited for agriculture and industry for well over 2,000 years.

Along the valley floor of the River Gaunless is the grassy track-bed of the former Haggerleases Railway line, which was built in 1830 (originally horse-drawn) as a branch line of the famous Stockton and Darlington Railway to transport coal to Teesside. We follow this grassy track-bed alongside the River Gaunless until we reach a low stone-built bridge, known locally as the Swin Bridge, that was built in 1830 as part of this Haggerleases Railway. This was the first skew bridge to be built for a railway, and was predicted to collapse when the first train crossed it! Still standing after 187 years, it is a Grade II listed structure. Note along the way the huge brick-built piers of the former Lands Viaduct, which carried the South Durham and Lancashire Union Railway across the Gaunless Valley en route from Bishop Auckland to Barnard Castle. This railway opened in the 1860s and became known as the Stainmore Line, as the railway continued from Barnard Castle across the Pennines to link up with what is now the West Coast Mainline at Tebay. The line was used to transport freight (mainly coal) and passengers, but closed in the 1960s.

The walk

1 From the centre of Cockfield (with your back to the Co-Op shop), turn right and walk down along the main street, passing the War Memorial and then the Queens Head pub to reach the last houses on your left at the bottom of the village, where you take the grassy path to the left (information board and a blue signpost 'Cemetery') that quickly leads to a stile beside a gate (just to the right of the last house). Cross the stile, and walk straight on across the field alongside the wall on your left to soon join an unenclosed lane (cemetery on your left). Follow this lane straight on heading down across Cockfield Fell for 350 metres to reach the small cluster of houses at Fell Houses. As you reach the end of the lane in front of the long bungalow, carry straight on along the broad grassy path with the wall then old fence on your left at first then, where this old broken fence ends after a short distance, carry straight on along the grassy path heading gradually down for 125 metres to reach the brow of a steeper bank, where you follow the clear path to the left slanting down to reach a footbridge across the River Gaunless, set in a pronounced valley.

2 Cross the footbridge then turn immediately left along the broad, flat grassy path (track-bed of the 1830 Haggerleases Railway) that leads up through the valley alongside the River Gaunless on your left, passing the huge bridge support and piers of the former Lands Viaduct. After the viaduct piers, continue straight on along the clear greasy riverside path heading up through the Gaunless Valley for a further 1.1 km to reach a low stone bridge (Swin Bridge - historic 1830 skew railway bridge) across the River Gaunless. Cross the bridge then immediately turn left over a stile in the corner, then walk up alongside the wall on your right (away from the river), over some moss-covered concrete foundations to join the foot of the bank (valley sides) beside the end of an old fence. Turn right along the foot of this bank and follow the clear grassy/muddy track straight on (fence on your right), passing the Water Treatment Works to join the access track leading from the Water Treatment Works. As you reach the access track, cross straight over the stile across the fence opposite, then head on to quickly reach another stile over

a fence that leads over another bridge (old railway bridge) across the River Gaunless, after which follow the enclosed path straight on to emerge on a road on a sharp bend at The Slack (couple of houses).

3 Follow the road straight on for 125 metres to reach a road junction, where you turn left over a road bridge across the River Gaunless (sign 'Evenwood, Cockfield'), then follow this road on to soon reach another road junction where you carry straight on up the hill then, after 50 metres (just as the road bends right), take the path to the left over a wooden stile (signpost). After the stile, follow the path up to the right through gorse bushes to quickly emerge out onto Cockfield Fell. Carry straight on along the grassy path rising up across Cockfield Fell after 200 metres to reach the raised track-bed of the former Stainmore Railway Line (fallen masonry blocks). Cross over the old track-bed and carry straight on along the grassy path rising up across Cockfield Fell (ignore path branching off to the left) for 800 metres (houses of Cockfield come into view – aim towards the right-hand side of the houses) to join a fence on your left, at the back of the houses, garages and washing lines. Carry straight on with this fence on your left then, about 50 metres before a fence across your path, head left through a small gate in this fence, after which follow the grassy path to the right to join the road at the top end of Cockfield. Turn left along the road back into the village.

Mark Reid
Walking Weekends 2017
Peak District, Yorkshire Dales,
Lake District & Snowdonia
walkingweekenders.co.uk

Unique corporate activity days,
navigation skills and team building
experiences in the great outdoors.
teamwalking.co.uk

Birdwatch By Ian Kerr

GYR falcons, *pictured*, are the largest and most spectacular of the European falcons and are essentially an Arctic species, occurring on average only three or four times annually in Britain and Ireland. They are larger and paler than peregrine falcons, some adults appearing in striking white plumage which puts them in a class of their own.

As a result, when one flew down the North-East coast the other day birders everywhere were instantly on the alert for the chance of even a passing glimpse. That bird, a white-phase juvenile, was first seen chasing

waders at Bamburgh. Five hours later it reappeared over Druridge Pools and Cresswell Pond and then continued southwards as if continuing down the coast. Sadly, it then vanished, and has not been seen since, dashing the hopes of many of perhaps a once in a lifetime opportunity of catching up with this charismatic species.

Gyr falcons, particularly white individuals, have always the most highly prized possessions of falconers because of their size, strength and hunting ability. Individuals occasionally escape or are lost and that immediately causes problems for birders. The very few which do appear are

often regarded with suspicion, because of the possibility that they are of captive origin rather than true Arctic wanderers.

Most of those recorded are in the northern and western isles of Scotland, something to be expected being much closer to their regular haunts in Greenland, Iceland, northern Scandinavia and Russia. Despite that, over the decades, Durham has done remarkably well with six individuals which have been accepted as genuine winter visitors. The last three were all the white individuals every birder hopes to see. They appeared in January 1991 on

Bollihope Common, in November 1994 on Hunstanworth Moor and in January 2006 at Startforth, Barnard Castle. It would be nice to think that somewhere out on those Durham moors this latest individual is lurking waiting to be re-discovered.

Away from the excitement of mega-rarities, the regular movement back inland of thousands of waders is gathering pace. Certainly, coastal numbers of lapwings, oystercatchers, curlews and golden plover has been declining sharply.

I came across my first displaying lapwings of the season last

weekend. Their noisy aerial display with much rolling, banking and diving is one of the most typical sights and sounds of this period. It's something that will increase rapidly over the next few weeks as more rough breeding areas are occupied. On my regular coastal patch where around 500 wintering curlew were present only 50 or 60 now remain and they will no doubt be departing soon.

