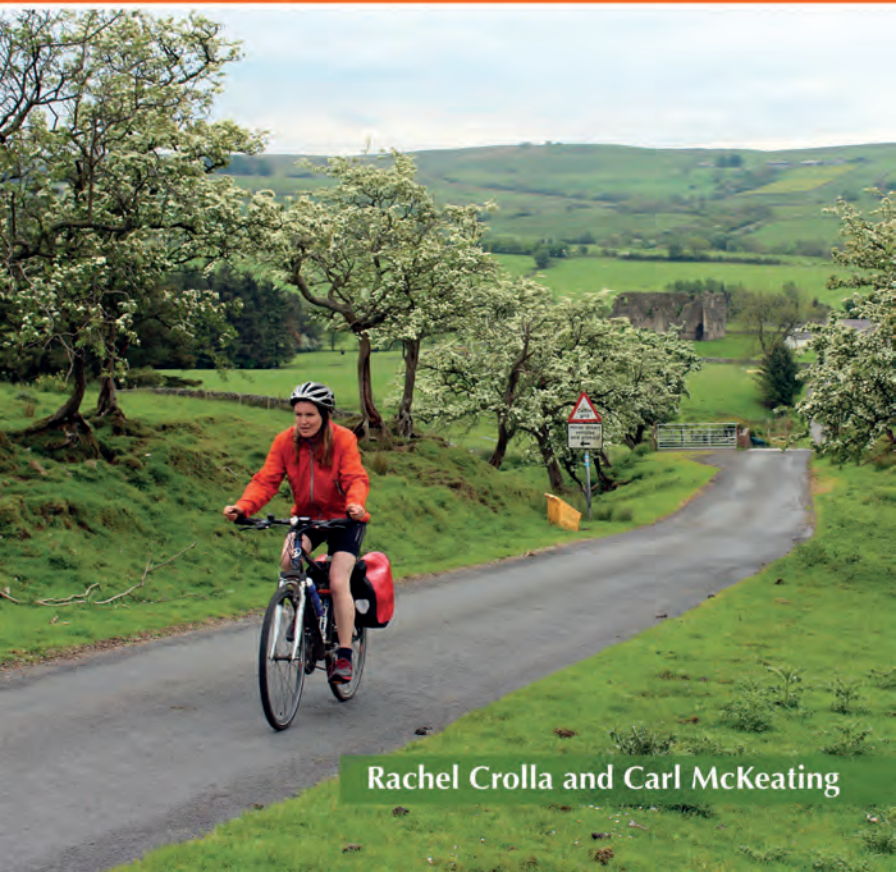


CICERONE

CYCLING THE REIVERS ROUTE

Coast to coast through wild
Northumberland's border country



Rachel Crolla and Carl McKeating

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**COAST TO COAST THROUGH WILD
NORTHUMBERLAND'S BORDER COUNTRY**

by Rachel Crolla and Carl McKeating

CICERONE

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Updates to this guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. This guidebook was researched and written before the COVID-19 pandemic. While we are not aware of any significant changes to routes or facilities at the time of printing, it is likely that the situation will give rise to more changes than would usually be expected. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/910/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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CONTENTS

Map key	7
Route summary tables	8
INTRODUCTION	11
Why choose the Reivers Route?	12
Who were the Reivers?	13
How tough is the ride?	15
How many days?	16
West to east or east to west?	17
Alternative: The Borderers Ride	17
Getting there and back	18
Where to stay	20
What kind of bike?	21
Equipment	22
Carrying your gear	23
What to wear	23
Maps and apps	24
Signage	25
Using this guide	26
THE REIVERS ROUTE: THE FOUR-DAY RIDE	27
Day 1 Whitehaven to Carlisle	30
Day 2 Carlisle to Bailey Mill	47
Day 3 Bailey Mill to Bellingham	57
Day 4 Bellingham to Tynemouth	74
The Borderers Ride: Gretna to Berwick-upon-Tweed	91
Appendix A Accommodation	118
Appendix B Bike shops and other useful contacts	123
Appendix C Further reading	125

Front cover: Hawthorn blossom on the climb from Bewcastle (Day 2)

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Note on mapping

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency. However, we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

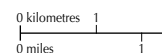


The grassy road to Colt Crag Reservoir (Day 4)

Symbols used on route maps

	route		caution
	traffic-free section		café
	alternative route		public house
	traffic-free section on alternative route		bike shop
	route direction		refreshments available
	start point		toilets
	finish point		all amenities
	alternative start point		castle
	alternative finish point		battlefield
	steep ascent or descent		church/cathedral
	very steep ascent or descent		monastery/cross
	station/railway line		point of interest
	national boundary		lighthouse

SCALE: 1:100,000



Contour lines are drawn at 50m intervals and labelled at 100m intervals. Route maps are drawn at 1:100,000 (1 cm = 1 km)

GPX files for all routes can be downloaded free at www.cicerone.co.uk/910/GPX.

Features on the overview map

	County/Unitary boundary		National Park eg THE LAKE DISTRICT
	National boundary		Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty eg Solway Coast
	Urban area		

ROUTE SUMMARY TABLES

Reivers Route: Four-day itinerary					
	Start	Finish	Distance	Ascent	Page
Day 1	Whitehaven (NX 969 182)	Carlisle (NY 398 565)	51 miles (82km)	1076m	30
Day 2	Carlisle (NY 398 565)	Bailey Mill (NY 517 785)	34 miles (55km)	683m	47
Day 3	Bailey Mill (NY 517 785)	Bellingham (TQ 374 717)	37 miles (60km)	875m	57
Day 4	Bellingham (TQ 374 717)	Tynemouth (NZ 374 691)	51 miles (82km)	764m	74

Reivers Route: East to west four-day itinerary					
	Start	Finish	Distance	Ascent	Page
Day 1	Tynemouth (NZ 374 691)	Bellingham (TQ 374 717)	51 miles (82km)	859m	90
Day 2	Bellingham (TQ 374 717)	Bailey Mill (NY 517 785)	37 miles (60km)	875m	73
Day 3	Bailey Mill (NY 517 785)	Carlisle (NY 398 565)	34 miles (55km)	598m	56
Day 4	Carlisle (NY 398 565)	Whitehaven (NX 969 182)	51 miles (82km)	1051m	46

Reivers Route: Three-day itinerary				
	Start	Finish	Distance	Page
Day 1	Whitehaven (NX 969 182)	Carlisle (NY 398 565)	51 miles (82km)	30
Day 2	Carlisle (NY 398 565)	Kielder village (NY 626 938)	63 miles (101km)	47
Day 3	Kielder village (NY 626 938)	Tynemouth (NZ 374 691)	69 miles (111km)	64

Borderers Ride: Four-day itinerary					
	Start	Finish	Distance	Ascent	Page
Day 1	Gretna (NY 316 660)	Bailey Mill (NY 517 785)	35 miles (56km)	640m	92
Day 2	Bailey Mill (NY 517 785)	Bellingham (TQ 374 717)	37 miles (60km)	875m	97
Day 3	Bellingham (TQ 374 717)	Wooler (NT 991 281)	45 miles (72km)	1092m	97
Day 4	Wooler (NT 991 281)	Berwick-upon-Tweed (NU 009 524)	34 miles (55km)	483m	108

Borderers Ride: Three-day itinerary				
	Start	Finish	Distance	Page
Day 1	Gretna (NY 316 660)	Kielder village (NY 626 938)	53 miles (85km)	92
Day 2	Kielder village (NY 626 938)	Branton/Ingram area (NU 046 163)	57 miles (92km)	64
Day 3	Branton/Ingram area (NU 046 163)	Berwick-upon-Tweed (NU 009 524)	40 miles (64km)	105



Sunny cycling at Kielder Water (Day 3)

INTRODUCTION

Late afternoon sunlight near Isel in northern Lakeland (Day 1)



The Reivers Route is easily the least ridden of the northern coast-to-coast routes on the National Cycle Network. Yet there is much to be said for the road less travelled. Answering the spirited cry of the adventurer, the Reivers Cycle Route is a wild 170-mile (275km) coast-to-coast ride on cycle paths, little-known minor roads and forest tracks; anyone with a love of cycle touring will delight in this well-kept secret. The ride ventures north from the Cumbrian coast through the dramatic northern fringes of the Lake District National Park and onwards through Carlisle to raid into the wild heart of the thinly populated Border Reivers territory around the England–Scotland border. The route then follows

the border through one of Europe's largest forests to reach Kielder Water with its purpose-built cycle path. From there the route continues, incorporating the scenic valleys and airy tops of the Northumberland National Park, often on gated roads that see hardly any motor vehicles. Finally, the ride sweeps south and eastwards to reach Tynemouth for an end sequence of 15 miles on predominantly cinder and tarmac cycle paths.

The Reivers Route was developed by a consortium including Sustrans and opened in 1998, but has seen a series of revisions over the last two decades, with the most recent changes being made in 2020. The original premise was to provide an

extended east-to-west return journey for the ever-popular C2C cycle route and, subsequently, for the increasingly popular Hadrian's Cycleway, both of which end at the mouth of the River Tyne. However, most cyclists who undertake the Reivers Route do so to experience the ride in its own right, usually from west to east. Our primary route description reflects this tendency and describes the route in the Whitehaven to Tynemouth direction, with advice on how to reverse the route at the end of each stage.

WHY CHOOSE THE REIVERS ROUTE?

The Reivers Route is a wilder, hillier and more challenging undertaking than Sustrans' other northern coast-to-coast rides. Its remote sections and superb lengthy off-road passages are part of its appeal. All of this means that the full route is best tackled over four days. The ride is also replete with exceptional cycling, whether it is the meandering line adopted among the watercolour landscapes on the Back o' Skiddaw;



The Reivers Route skirts the England–Scotland border



passing along the England–Scotland border in the enchanting deep forest between Kershope Bridge and Kielder Water on tracks and cinder paths; or rolling along the gated roads that maintain an elevated course over the north-western Pennines between Bellingham and Ponteland. As remote as the Reivers Route at times feels – especially on Days 2 and 3 – amenities have a knack of being at just the right locations.

WHO WERE THE REIVERS?

Picture yourself living near the England–Scotland border 500 years ago. It is the dead of night. A distant sound of pounding hooves chasing over heathery moors is mixing with the howl of wind-driven rain. A raid is imminent. You either flee, lock the door of your bastle house or take to arms in order to defend your land, livestock and family. It is a brutal existence. If raided, you will retaliate with a raid of your own. This is the life of a Border Reiver.

The Border Reivers are most keenly associated with the period between the 13th and 17th centuries – although the borderers were probably a distinct group dating back at least to the Roman partition of Great Britain in the time of Hadrian. As the Borderlands were subjected to the toing and froing of advancing and retreating English and Scottish armies, the Border Reivers emerged as a distinguishable people who carved

out an identity distinct from either Scottishness or Englishness. Indeed, in 1525 the Archbishop of Glasgow, Gavin Dunbar, issued a 'Curse of the Reivers and their Descendants', which was to be read from every pulpit and market cross in the Borderlands. The 1000-word curse is terrifying in the vengeance it threatens to wreak on the Reivers: 'All malevolence and curses that ever affected worldly creatures since the beginning of the world to this hour must light upon them.'

The Reivers were hardened by geography and circumstance. As passing armies would exploit and raid, local inhabitants themselves could be paid or inculcated into the warring advances. Likewise the raided were also raiders in their own right, pillaging other Reiver strongholds or foraging farther afield. It was an age of fluid alliances and blood feuds, when kinship meant everything and national affiliation meant very little. Sheep wrangling was often the most prevalent ambition on a raid – 'to reive' is to raid livestock. Wealthier Reivers built bastle houses to defend themselves against other marauding Reivers. Bastles (coming from the familiar French word *bastille*, meaning stronghold) were generally two-storey keeps, although variations of such medieval 'tower houses' can be seen across Europe. The ground floor would house the livestock and the occupants would live upstairs. Over 1000 bastles, often in the form of pele towers, were built in the



Woodhouse Bastle gives a flavour of life in reiving times (Borderers Ride, Day 3)

Borders between 1500 and 1700. Some of these can be seen today on the Reivers Route and the Borderers Ride. But such dwellings could hold out only so long; the razing to the ground of buildings with inhabitants and livestock inside was not uncommon. As you cycle along some of the quietest and wildest minor roads in Britain, often without seeing another soul for hours, it is easy to imagine the spectral figures of long-ago Reivers galloping their way across the moors on one of their raids.

While the union of the crowns of England and Scotland under James I (James VI of Scotland) diminished the contested nature of the border region and the Reivers became less

relevant or distinguishable, many would argue that a special Reivers character lives on in the custodians of the region – but if it does, it manifests itself in some of the most warm-hearted and friendly communities in the British Isles. Indeed, Neil Armstrong, who visited Langholm and the pele tower at Gilnockie on an incidental pilgrimage to seek out his roots three years after setting foot on the moon, was reputedly overcome by the good-spirited nature of the border peoples.

The Reivers era left a cultural legacy that extends to a rich vein of poetry and traditional song. Both the valiant and villainous deeds of the period are immortalised in Border ballads. While such ballads give a sense of the troubled times and political realities of the borderlands, they tend to have limited or dubious historical sources and undoubtedly were often written to serve propaganda purposes – whether to invoke anti-English, anti-Scottish or anti-rival clan sentiments. Although the tales were largely invented, these action-packed and often gruesome songs were notably collated by one of Europe's most popular 19th-century authors, Sir Walter Scott, in 1802 (see Appendix C). Many have evolved into folk songs still performed today. A great number of the famous clan families and places on the cycling routes in this book are mentioned in the ballads.

Today, the Reivers Route and the Borderers Ride offer windows into



History is kept alive at the annual Hawick Reivers Festival, usually held in March

the world of the Reivers, which in turn allows an alternative perspective on some of the key contemporary political debates at this fascinating moment in the history of the British Isles, when questions around national identities, Scottish independence and the future of the England–Scotland border abound. To an extent, even the Reiver identity has been swept up into the debate.

HOW TOUGH IS THE RIDE?

The Reivers Route is an attainable goal for most people. If you can comfortably ride 40 miles with 900m of ascent and still clamber back onto your saddle the next day, then you will be more than able to tackle the

four-day itinerary. If it were tackled over the same number of days, then the 170-mile Reivers Route would be significantly harder than the 132-mile C2C, the 171-mile Way of the Roses and the 174-mile Hadrian's Cycleway. However, by allowing four days, the Reivers becomes roughly equivalent, if not marginally easier, than those rides tackled over three days. The remote situation of the Kielder Forest traverse is another reason that a four-day itinerary is a sensible choice. The challenge on any cycle tour is naturally increased if planning to carry tents and camping equipment or if prevailing weather conditions work against you.

While the steepest climbs on the Reivers Route are generally found in the northern Lake District, more protracted and equally challenging climbs await in the Borders and Northumbrian segments. These tend to be satisfying affairs that allow height to be savoured once gained. Based on the present OS mapping tool, the overall ascent on the Reivers Route is 3365m. To put this in context, Hadrian's Cycleway has 2378m, the C2C has 3612m and the Way of the Roses has 2829m. The Borderers Ride has 3103m of ascent overall.

A note on the **Kielder Forest traverse**: On our first ride in research for this book we set out from Dalston aiming to make Kielder Water. Late October and carrying full camping kit, our day proved a slow one into north-easterly headwinds. After

DAY 1

Whitehaven to Carlisle

Start	Whitehaven (NX 969 182)
Finish	Carlisle (NY 398 565)
Distance	51 miles (82km)
Total ascent	1076m
Steepest climb	'Back o' Skiddaw' area has some gems: the short sharp shock up to Fell End on the slopes of Binsey comes out of nowhere and touches 1 in 5 on its hairpin; the climb through Lowthwaite Farm is also fairly stiff; while the two steep sections of the protracted ascent from Longlands Beck will probably challenge most.
Terrain	There are good surfaces on the traffic-free paths on the coast. The day's ride is all possible on a road bike. The section from Cockermouth onwards is all on quiet minor roads.
OS maps	Landranger 89, 90 and 85
Refreshments	Workington, Great Broughton, Cockermouth, Hesketh Newmarket, Dalston
Intermediate distances	Workington 8 miles (13km), Great Broughton 12 miles (19km), Cockermouth 15 miles (24km), Longlands 26 miles (42km), Caldbeck 32 miles (51km), Hesketh Newmarket 34 miles (55km)

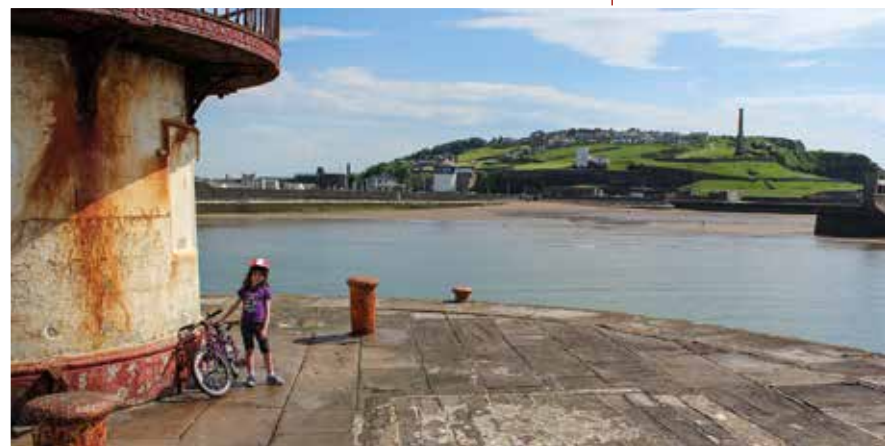
The day starts with a superb stretch of sea-view riding along traffic-free paths on the Cumbrian coast. A well-maintained network of disused rail lines takes you through Workington and then inland towards the Lakeland fells, which form the skyline for a large section of the ride. The route then heads through the attractive market town of Cockermouth – birthplace of William and Dorothy Wordsworth – and skirts the tranquil north-western fringes of the Lake District National Park, threading a course round the Back o' Skiddaw – with views of the eponymous mountain providing some of the day's scenic highlights. Hilly terrain dominates this section until the route approaches the tamer Caldew valley and eventually reaches the large,

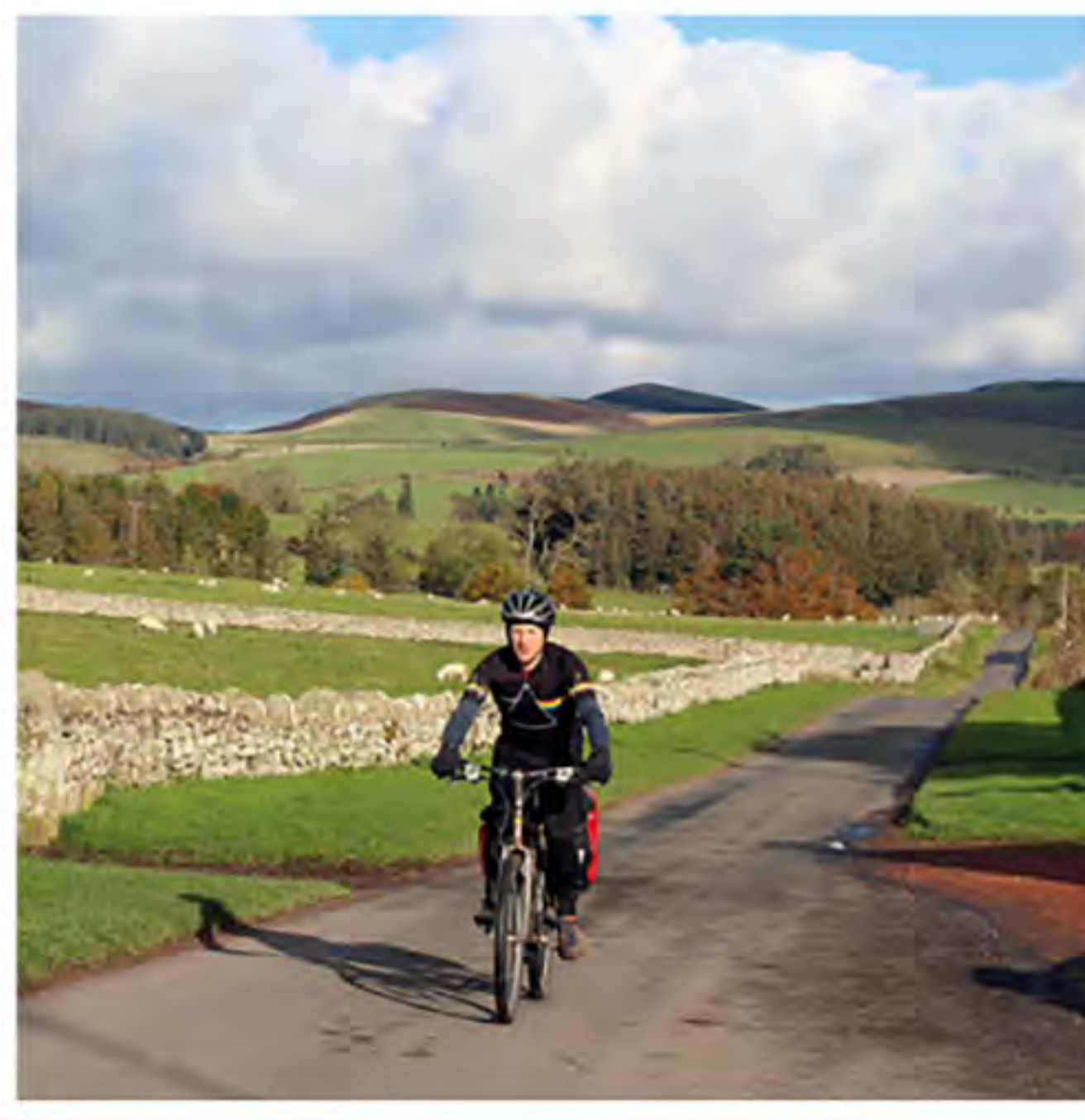
unassuming village of Dalston. For campers, there is a good site between here and Carlisle, but for other cycle tourists we would recommend carrying on for a further five flat and mainly traffic-free miles to stay in the historic cathedral city and Cumbrian county town of Carlisle.

Although some cyclists start the Reivers Route at the C2C harbour sculpture, the official beginning is intended to be at the nearby Beacon area. The Beacon, which now houses a local history museum, is the cone-topped white cylindrical building at the south side of the main harbour. The most dramatic and fitting start point is at the lookout, by the Candlestick chimney on the bluffs above this. The harbour is easily reached from Whitehaven rail station: cycle out of the car park past a superstore and turn right on the main road into town. Take the first left (10 signage), then cut left almost immediately onto the seafront path.

The distinctive **Candlestick chimney** vented a mineshaft of the former Wellington Pit, the scene of Cumbria's worst mining disaster, in which 134 miners lost their lives in 1910. There are two monuments to the tragedy here, along with a recently commissioned mosaic. It is a contemplative and scenic spot to start the ride.

*Whitehaven's
Candlestick chimney
and the Beacon from
one of the town's
two lighthouses*





- **challenging 4 day cycle tour** • **coast-to-coast route from Whitehaven to Tynemouth** • **Cumbrian coast, northern Lake District, Kielder Water and Northumberland National Park**

Delve into the heart of Border Reivers territory on this wild and remote cycle tour. The 173 mile Reivers Route skirts the England–Scotland border as it crosses the country from Whitehaven to Tynemouth, and makes forays into the lands ravaged by Border raiders between the 14th and 17th centuries. The route includes miles of memorable off-road track through Kershope Forest and lakeshore cycling on purpose-built paths beside Kielder Water, taking in the Cumbrian coast, northern Lake District, Northumberland National Park and North Tynedale.

An alternative 150 mile route, the Borderers Ride, is also described, linking the famous border towns of Gretna and Berwick-upon-Tweed with the spectacular middle section of the Reivers Route.



- **best cycled April to October**
- **suitable for touring or hybrid bikes with road bike friendly alternatives**
- **includes 3, 4 and 5 day itineraries and alternative Borderers Ride**

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