

WALKING IN THE SCOTTISH BORDERS

About the Author



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Ronald has nine times won Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild Awards for Excellence for his guidebooks (including *Jurassic Coast*), outdoor books (including *The Book of the Bivvy*), and magazine articles. He writes frequently in *Lakeland Walker*, *Trail* and *The Great Outdoors (TGO)*.
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Walking the Southern Upland Way
(revised and updated 2018)

WALKING IN THE SCOTTISH BORDERS

CHEVIOTS, TWEED, ETTICK,
MOFFAT AND MANOR HILLS

by Ronald Turnbull

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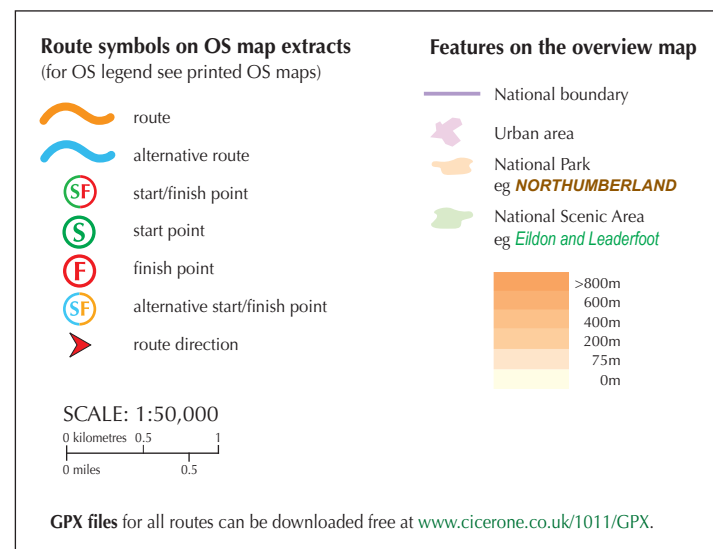
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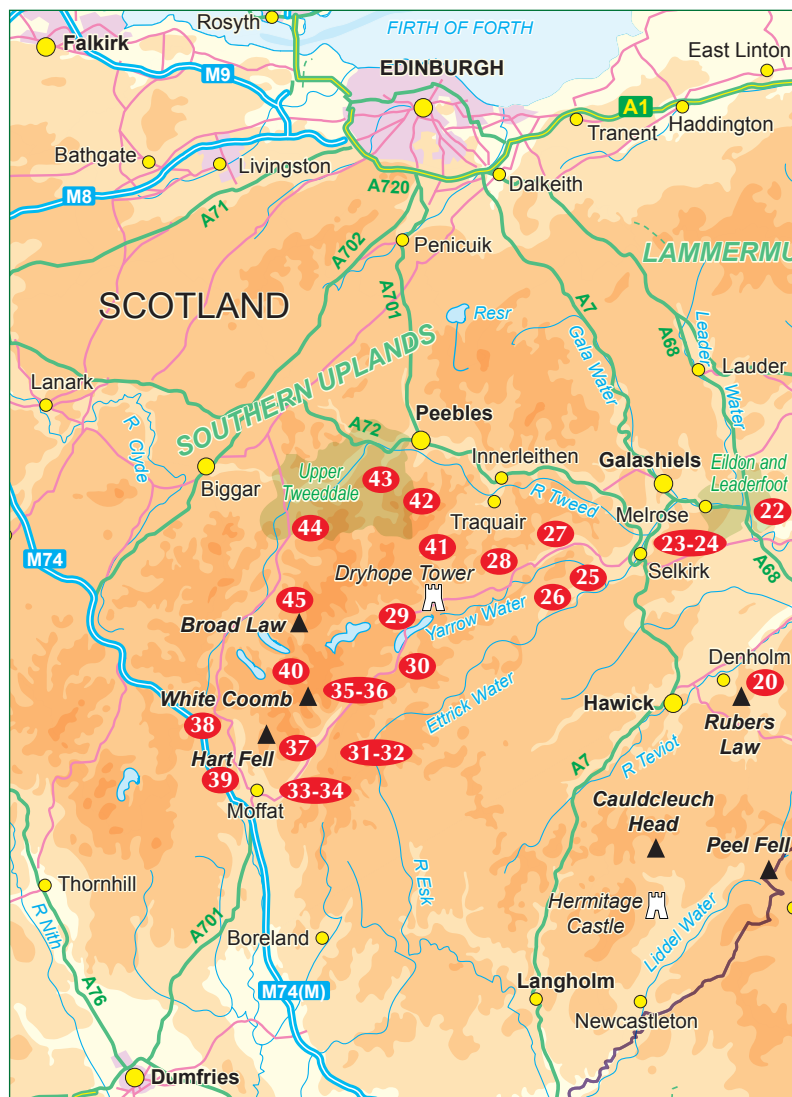
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INTRODUCTION



Moffat Dale and the Ettrick Head hills (Walk 33)

The Scottish Border Country, the historic battleground between England and Scotland, stretches from the Cheviots as far as the headwaters of the Tweed and what is today the M74 motorway. It's a land of little green valleys and the shining rivers that run through them – whether those drain northwards to the Tweed or southwards into England. On either side rise steep but grassy slopes, cut by sharp little streams, and topped off with Iron Age forts and the occasional rocky tor.

The high country above and between the valleys is crisscrossed with green pathways. These were once busy with Roman soldiers, long-striding saints, cattle thieves and the occasional wandering salt salesman. Today they're kept open by the shepherd on her quad bike – but also, increasingly, by walkers who value the solitude below the wide skies and the lonely

cry of the plover. Here too is upland more austere: nodding cotton grass, dark heather stalks, silver puddles and black peaty bog. Such country has its own charm, but it's often the lower hills, shaped and drained by the streams of the valley's sides, that give the most rewarding walking.

This book starts with such hill country: the Cheviots, whether approached from Scotland or northwards out of England. It ends with the hills of the west: Ettrick and Moffat and the Manors. In between it's the Tweed, the big river that drains out of Scotland but ends in England, whose every ford has run bloodstained from battle. Here are walks along the wide water, dodging below ancient castles for coffee in one of the brownstone villages or in the shadow of an abbey ruined by Henry VIII. Here too are small, free-standing summits poking out of the plain. Eildon and Rubers



River Tweed near Norham Castle (Walk 16)

Law offer a more open and airy sort of half-day on the hill.

The great River Tweed and the five hill ranges that supply its waters: this country has a shaggy character all of its own, bloodstained in its history but (mostly) smooth underfoot. If you're bored of the Borders, then you're bored of life.

THE BORDERS OF THE BORDERS

In 1975, local government reorganisation lumped together the Scottish counties of Peebles, Roxburgh, Selkirk and Berwick into a region called Borders (its slogan: 'Scotland's top short break destination'). This is a smaller area than what has traditionally been known as the Border Country or the Scottish Borders. For this book, the country of the Border is considered as being the wide valley of the Tweed, along with the hills that drain into it: the Cheviots to the south, and the Ettrick, Moffat and Manor Hill

ranges around its headwaters in the west. Of the walks included, 25 are within the local government's Borders region – or at least set off from there, as often we will be crossing the borders of Borders. But given that this is a book for walkers, geography has to trump politics: 13 of the walks actually start on the English side of the border, in the southern and eastern Cheviots or the lowest part of the Tweed. Westwards, 7 are in Dumfries & Galloway Region. Overall, 6 are fully international, crossing into both Scotland and England.

My *Walking in the Southern Uplands*, also published by Cicerone, is an overview of hill walks from Galloway to the Lammermuirs. This includes the high ground sections 1, 2, and 4–6 of this book. Some summits, such as White Coomb and The Cheviot, are necessarily included in both books; but this time around I've concentrated on slightly shorter and less severe ways up them, as well as on the rewarding smaller hills and

the valley floor. There is also some overlap on the English side of the border with Cicerone's *Walking in Northumberland*, by Vivienne Crow. There are five routes more-or-less common to the two books, though Viv and I rarely choose exactly the same route, even when we're both aiming for the same hill.

LAND OF BALLADS

'Every valley has its battle, and every stream its song,' Walter Scott wrote in 1830, while inviting a friend to visit his Abbotsford house beside the Tweed. If there's a true definition of the Scottish Borders, it comes from history. In the turbulent times of Scottish Independence after Bannockburn, the wide country between Galloway and the Tyne was fought and refought over so many times that the feudal structures of what then constituted civilisation broke down, reverting to

an earlier time of local warlords and an economy based on stealing one another's cattle. Coast to coast, from the northern tributaries of the Tyne to the southern tributaries of the Tweed and westwards to Gretna Green, neither England nor Scotland governed.

The way of life – which involved a high level of death, by starvation or sword-play – lasted for 150 years, ending quite abruptly at the Union of the Crowns in 1603. These everyday customs are recorded in the Border Ballads, collected 200 years later by Walter Scott (descended from one of the most dreaded Border clans himself). But more than that, you can read it in the country itself: the pele towers and the fortified farmhouses known as bastles; the sturdy Border townships with their seven-a-side rugby and riding of the marches; the truce cairns along the border ridgeline where disputes could sometimes be settled without anybody needing to get killed.

Dryhope Tower (Walk 29)



WALKING IN THE SCOTTISH BORDERS

And above all, in the emptiness (even today) of the long valleys with their winding silver rivers and hillforts on the horizon: Ettrick and Yarrow, Moffat Dale and Manor Water, Breamish and College and Coquet. Oystercatchers beep among the banks of shingle, and the curlews shriek and moan above the wide moors.

The people who lived here and loved these valleys – loved them right up until the hoofbeats came in the night and the thatch flamed above their heads – were Armstrongs and Elliots, the Johnstones and Scotts and Kerrs, the Forsters and Fenwicks and Grahams, and the small but vicious tribe of Turnbulls. They're scattered across the world now, replaced by empty grazings of the Cheviot sheep. Nithsdale to upper Clyde is a continuous windfarm; Ottersburn a shooting range for tanks; Kielder a woodpulp plantation, the biggest in Europe.

But on a summer bank holiday, Breamish returns to its lively state of seven hundred years ago. Cars sparkle

along the road verge like the river running beside them, as families and fellwalkers stream through Linhope on their way to the waterfall. The hill paths used by the cattle raiders – and before them by the saints trekking through to Lindisfarne, the Roman legions, the tribes of the Iron Age – are busy again with folk in waterproof jackets, little rucksacks on their backs.

GEOLOGY OF THE SCOTTISH BORDERS

About 400 million years ago, what would eventually be called Scotland crunched into what would end up as England. On either side, the crumpled-up rocks form the hill zones of today: the Highlands and the Lake District, respectively. In between the two, deep ocean sludges were raised and crumpled like a trodden-on tube of toothpaste. The compressed sludges formed a rock called greywacke; their hill range, in the squash zone between England and Scotland, is the Southern Uplands.



Granite tor, Bellyside Crag on The Cheviot (Walk 7)

Greywacke is slabby and massive. It doesn't form great cliffs, but eroded rocky scars and little gill streams. Where enough of it shows to reveal the bedding of the ancient ocean floor, you'll see that it's been folded and bent up vertical by the continental collision. Friable shale beds found in some gullies contain scratchy small fossils of ancient sea creatures (see Walk 36).

As the collision ground to an end, earth movements and friction heat deep underground melted rocks above. The rock-melt erupted as lava from volcanoes, or crystallised below the surface as granite. The resulting rocks now form the Cheviot Hills; granite at the centre, surrounded by volcanic lavas. Like the Southern Uplands, the hills are grassy (or peaty) and rounded. But they betray their volcanic origin in intrusive sills of tougher rock, and occasional little granite tors. The rocks, when you see them, are pinkish. The granite is crystalline; the featureless rhyolite can contain yellowish crystals of feldspar.

Between the two ranges, the wide Tweed valley is made of much softer rock, the Old Red Sandstone. This formed in a hot desert climate, from debris washed out of the mountains. Where it's seen in riverbanks, the contrast with the harder mountain rocks is obvious. But it's more visible as an excellent building stone, forming the ruined abbeys and handsome towns.

Long after The Cheviot had calmed down again, some small volcanoes erupted through the red sandstone, to give us the rugged little hills like Rubers Law. At St Abb's Head (visited on Walk 17), these jumbled lavas lie right alongside both the Old Red Sandstone and the greywacke.

WILDLIFE

Given centuries of heavy grazing by sheep, the plantlife has degraded to a mix of coarse grassland, bog cotton and sphagnum moss in the soggy places, and heather on the drier ground. In spring and early summer a few brightly coloured wildflowers

Folded greywacke at Pettico Wick, St Abbs (Walk 17)



1: THE CHEVIOTS (SOUTH)

When approached out of England, the Cheviots are remarkably remote. Not only do they lie further north than some parts of Scotland, they are also hidden away behind the UK's largest wood pulp plantation, and the red flags of the Otterburn military ranges. In the off-season especially, their national-park status is belied by the loneliness of the long, green valleys.

It's the valleys that give the Cheviot Hills their character: Alwin and Coquet flow south to the Tyne; Breamish is still in England but runs northwards to the Tweed. Each has its tiny tarmac road, crossing and recrossing its silver stream, dodging around a gorse bush to reach another lonely farmhouse. And at each valley head, older roads head upwards into the hills; Roman Dere Street and Bronze Age Clennell Street, or the green paths of the 16th-century cattle thieves.

Also characteristically Cheviot are the steep-sided, grassy-topped hills that rise above the valleys at every wiggle. Iron Age man and woman appreciated these, every bit as much as the hillwalkers of today. Ancient green pathways run up into

the hollows, and half of the hills are topped off with a hillfort. Walk 1 tracks those ancient pathways to small but distinguished Shillhope Law; Walk 2 takes a more recent route – one that's merely Roman in age – up to the 600m contour on the Border ridgeline. Walk 4 in the Breamish valley is a fort walk specifically.

Winding valleys, ancient settlements – are we forgetting that the Cheviots are (the clue's in the name) a range of hills? Well, it would be easily done. Many of the highest points are flat places of peat and heather. Hedgehope Hill (Walk 5) gives you a taste of this distinctive but not altogether delightful sort of country. On the return leg, the black swamp that forms The Cheviot itself is rather easier to appreciate, as it's crossed by a stone-slab path.

Last and also least, the short Walk 3, leading to an impressive waterfall, is the southern Cheviots' one really popular walk.

WALK 1

Shillhope Law from Alwinton

Start/finish	Alwinton (NT 921 063)
Alternative start/finish	Shillmoor farm (NT 883 077) for the shorter variant
Distance	18km (11 miles)
Ascent	750m
Harshness	4
Approx time	6hr
Terrain	Ancient tracks and paths; 1km of rough moorland and a rough ascent above Usway Burn
Highest point	Shillhope Law, 501m
Parking	Grass parking at the foot of Clennell Street. There is also a Pay and Display car park further west in the village.
Variants	Short cut omitting Shillhope Law 15.5km (9½ miles) 550m ascent – about 5hr. Shillhope Law from Shillmoor farm 9km (5½ miles) 400m – about 3hr.

Though only 500m high, Shillhope is one of just five in the Cheviots marked on Harvey maps as a 'major hill'. This will be because of its status as a Marilyn – a hill with 150m of clear drop all around. Its tent shape, pitched between the Coquet and Usway valleys, means a north-south traverse along its ridgeline is rewarding. But it's also rather short! The remedy is to start from further away, at Alwinton, along ancient highways of Clennell Street and the Pass Peth.

Those who want Shillhope in a hurry, however, can start at Shillmoor farm; this is described at the start of the main route. While those who don't want Shillhope Law at all can link the ancient paths via the same Usway Burn short cut, half way through the walk.

Alternative start from Shillmoor farm

Start at the roadside opposite Shillmoor farm (NT 885 077). Head up the farm's tarmac access lane, and bear left before the buildings in a track marked as private

MoD road. It runs into the **Usway Burn** valley. Follow it upstream, or on grassy riverbanks, crossing three girder bridges.

At a gate before **Batailshiel Haugh**, bear right on a green path above the fence, to pass above the buildings, with a wiggle to the right to a footbridge over Mid Hope.

Stay above the fence to a path fork, where a brideway ahead continues



above the fence through a small gate, now rejoining the main route.

Start from Alwinton

From Alwinton, cross a footbridge onto the tarmac lane of **Clennell Street**, and head uphill, soon on a grass and gravel track with widening views. It passes round the base of Castle Hills, a large but indistinct **settlement** (hill-fort) with great views back over the valley. Then it runs to left of fences along a ridgeline above Alwinton Burn.

CLENNELL STREET

Clennell is a Bronze Age trackway, evidenced by hillforts, roundhouses and burial cairns along its route. Originally named as Yarnspeth or Earnspeth (eagle's path) – the pseudo-Roman 'Clennell St' is a Victorian affectation. It continued to be an important highway well into the 18th century, and still has the status of a highway (on the English side a 'restricted byway') with a regular MoT road sign high on the Border ridge (Walk 2).

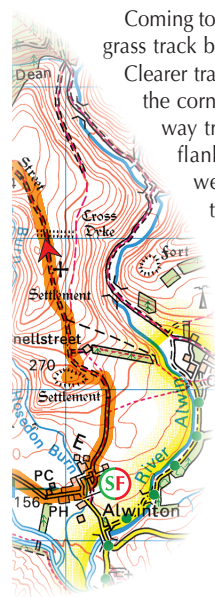
Coming to a slight rise above Hosedon Linn, the faint grass track bears slightly right, around the right flank. Clearer track heads down northwest to a gate above the corner of a plantation. ▶ Take the faint brideway track, still northwest, around the northern flank of the slight rise Uplaw Knowe. Drop west past wooden sheep pens to a clearer track running to right of a fence.

As the ground rises again, the track bears right, high above **Kidlandlee Dean**, then rises past a tin sheep shed. ▶ The track drops into forestry plantations, and joins a gravelled forest road north. After 1km there's open ground on the left, and in another 600 metres the track bends right with a wooden gate on the left.

Through this, very faint wheelmarks lead across rough moorland very slightly

The former Clennell Street headed through this plantation but is invisible on the ground.

This is all that remains of Wholehope, a shepherd's cottage that in the 1940s and 50s became a primitive youth hostel.





Heading down to
Batailshiel Haugh

The short route from
Shillmoor joins here.

uphill, bearing 290°, to the start of a wide, grassy moorland shoulder running down southwest. Head down it to go through a gate at the col before **The Castles**.

You could now turn steeply down right, left of the fence – or in bracken-free winter, keep ahead over The Castles. But easiest is to turn down left, beside the fence. Before a shepherds' hut start slanting down pasture to a field gate and the footpath/bridleway junction above the fields of **Batailshiel Haugh**. ◀

Short cut omitting Shillhope Law

Keep ahead above the fence, wiggling left over a footbridge then passing above Batailshiel Haugh onto its access track. Follow this down **Usway Burn** to the farm at **Shillmoor**, to rejoin the main route.

For Shillhope Law, turn back right above the fence, dropping to a green path along the riverbank. The slope opposite is covered with bracken. So, follow the stream bank around the base of The Castles. Where the stream bends right, the path passes along slightly rocky

riverbank. Here, cross the stream to a fence corner. Head uphill, north, in a re-entrant with grass rather than bracken, but still rugged going.

At the 350m contour, a quad bike path contours left through the bracken, to a gate in ridgeline fence (NT 8758 1098). ▶

Turn left along the grassy ridgeline, gently uphill to a gate, then up wheelmarks to right of a fence, through heather. At the fence top the wheelmarks turn right, to **Shillhope Law** trig point.

Return back east to go through a gate and turn down to left of the fence. It's grassy going, with a wheelmark track joining from the left at the first col. The grassy ridge-line runs high above Usway Burn, then bends down south above **Coquetdale**. After a gateway in a crossing fence, bear left to a fence corner, where a clear track runs down to the gravelled MoD track above Usway Burn. Turn right, to the farm at **Shillmoor**. ▶

At the riverside turn left on a track through a gate. As the track bears uphill, fork right on a green path (the Pass Peth) above the wall of a riverside field. The small but clear path crosses a footbridge, then runs above **River Coquet**. It crosses a track, into a strip of woods. Here it crosses a small stream, and slants uphill. ▶

After a gate out of the plantation the Pass Peth slants up onto a flat moorland shoulder. Cross this southeast, to a small gate below enclosed pasture. The path runs below a fence to another gate, then slants down rough grassland to the valley road. Above the road you can continue on a rough path along access land for another 500 metres, then join a track corner down onto the road. Follow it for 1 km into **Alwinton**.

If this is missed,
just head on uphill
past a rocky bulge
to the ridge top.

The shortcut route
rejoins here.

A decomposing stile
on the right is the
start of an overgrown
footpath to Linbriggs,
taking an exciting
line across steep
riverbank – try it in
winter perhaps.