

The Start

One of Whitehaven's many claims to fame was that it became the subject of the only attack on British soil by US forces, led by John Paul Jones in 1778. Today the Americans should be invited back to finish the job. Although with their inherent inability to hit a cow's posterior with a banjo they would probably miss completely. I'm actually being unfair to Whitehaven centre and harbour. The restored harbour front is a delight. The old centre is indeed full of lovely Georgian properties. My selected target for a flight of B52s would be the unsightly and almost constant ring of dull grey, low grade housing that surrounds the town through which the unwary traveller must travel upon glass and litter strewn paths.

We arrived on a Friday night, in late September 2007, for a planned nights rest and recreation before our three day C2C crossing. A normal British drink fuelled threatening atmosphere prevailed in the town centre, which forced us out to some hostelrys nearer to our digs. The unwelcome atmosphere of indifferent unsmiling service and inbred mistrust of strangers prevailed there too. The beauty of the countryside, as seen earlier in the day, contrasted strongly with the ugliness of attitude in the town centre that night. The pubs even nearer still to our digs were more friendly, but still less so than elsewhere on the trip.

A Whitehaven highlight was our digs for the night. The Cross Georgian House bed and breakfast is located in Hensingham, to the Northeast of Whitehaven. Beware though; it was a good 35-minute walk into the town centre. The B&B was a delight. A lovely room, super breakfast and welcoming landlady made us feel better about the place as did the two locals who without prompting or asking, shouted welcome encouragement and directions to the start as we cycled towards the harbour on the Saturday morning.

In bright sunshine we waited whilst another C2C party made up of friendly Geordies posed by the C2C start. Soon it was our turn for photographs. We then dipped our wheels in the Irish Sea and set off on the start of a classic ride.

They say that Dog owners look like their dogs. In Whitehaven this is most certainly true (If you see the owners then you will realize this is a bit cruel to the dogs). You will notice this observation as you dodge the dog owners, piles of dog sh*t and glass on the cycle paths out of town. It seems that the average Whitehaven resident has an inability to clear up after their pets as dog sh*t covers the town centre streets as well as the cycle paths. If the owners won't clear up after their mutts, why do they let them sh*t in the middle of the track? Obviously so fido doesn't get his feet dirty!

I wandered lonely as a cloud

Dog poo and associated owners soon faded as we cleared the depressing suburbs on the steady climb out of town towards the Lake District proper. The first 10 miles disappeared quickly as the stunning view towards Ennerdale water came into view at Kirkland. Some steep climbs and down hills led our group to the first rest point at Loweswater. The sharp upland beauty of the North lakes led us on to the only major climb of the day at Whinlatter Pass. This rises steeply at High Lorton before quickly abating to a more gradual climb over the pass proper. A very fast down hill led to pretty Braithwaite for a well earned couple of pints at the Coaldale Inn at the 27 mile point.

The C2C route then takes you through the very busy town of Keswick. Keswick is best avoided for lunch, as there was nowhere really safe to leave loaded cycles. Braithwaite, or any one of the pubs in the quiet hamlets en route to Penrith would be a better choice. The old railway line took us out northwards of Keswick on a very pretty route across rushing streams towards Greystoke and our target for the day at Penrith. The gradients on the road route are not steep and the second half of the days ride can be accomplished quite quickly – if that's what you want. We chose to avoid the old coach road (very, very steep off road route) and took the on road/trail route and stopped at the Mill Inn in Mungrisdale where the most fabulous meat pies are sold in the bar. Greystoke passed in a blur as we headed into Penrith. There is a suburb cycle café on the road going out of Greystoke, but unfortunately we couldn't visit as nearby Penrith and a hot shower beckoned.

Penrith – gateway to the hills proper

We stayed at the Fell Foot Hostel in Penrith – a super place to stay. I can't recommend this place enough. Only opened the last year, the landlady provides private rooms with shared bathrooms and kitchen. Each room and bathroom is very modern and provides ideal, incredibly good value digs for those staying overnight on the C2C. The only downside to a hungry C2C'er was a continental breakfast, but this is only a small gripe as the town centre is a mere step away. Penrith contrasts strongly with Whitehaven, in that it is more friendly – and bigger. The town is well worth a longer visit to enjoy the splendor of its buildings and history.

The hostel is at the bottom of the first climb of the day, but this is soon over as the route heads for Lanwathby. The North Pennines soon loom into majestic view. A huge mass of brooding land that rises up and fills the horizon. A brief stop with the binoculars identified the Hartside climb and the café on the top. The long climb is steep, especially into the strong headwind on the westerly loops of the road. The Sustrans maps are good but whilst they usefully point out the steep bits they do not show these gradients in percentages so the cyclist can work out if his gearing is adequate. The strong headwind soon turns into a strong tailwind as it pushes you up the downwind legs. Once the route hits the main road the gradient is much more continental (less steep) and in no time at all you arrive at the summit and the busy (but a bit expensive) café beckons. There is an awesome view from the top on a good day.

Brakes? What brakes – but don't go onto the moor at night.

The glorious fast descent into Alston is one of the best ever – I maxed out at 43mph on a mountain bike, On a road bike 50+ mph would easily be achievable. Long wide open bends and stunning views – what bike riding and the pain of getting there is all about.

The Cumberland hotel in Alston provided a good few pints of much needed recovery ale as we studied the route ahead. The cobbled streets of Alston led steeply upwards as we took the road option to Nenthead and the second major climb of Black hill. 20 minutes later we were posing at the top on the highest point on the C2C (disappointingly, no sign to say so or any altitude sign) Now if you think that the Hartside descent was good, Black Hill is better - faster and more technical it soon leads you to the third climb just after the turn to Allenheads. Another even faster even more technical down hill after 10 minutes of climbing leads you into the village of Allenheads and the welcoming bar of the Allenheads Inn at the end of our day two. I say welcoming – first impressions were – as the bar fell silent when we entered - that a pentangle was missing from the wall and we half expected Brian Glover to pop out telling us not go onto the moor at night. Still the hotel owner was chatty, the ale was good too.

If you take the Steeper and longer Garrigill option from Alston then the Allenheads Inn would be the best place to stop, but in retrospect if you take the Alston road route then the natural stop point for the day would be the Rookhope Inn in Rookhope as the faster route allows the C2C'er plenty of time to take the 15 minute climb out of Allenheads and time to enjoy another steep and fast descent. Rookhope is only 30 minutes at most from Allenheads.

At Rookhope the road divides once more to an off road section, liable to closure – or a road option. We chose the off road option. Due to the badly washed out condition of the 'path/track' we had to walk the mile to the top. A determined off roader would probably cope, but we had to walk. A mile later we arrived at the ruins at the top of Stanhope Common in pure grouse moorland. The trail gradually narrows to single-track that is passable with care, as some of the puddles disguise deep and dangerous holes. However, 20 minutes later the C2C'er arrives at Parkhead for the lovely descent off the Pennines along the fast Waskerley Way.

Why aye - Welcome to the North East. Wearside 'welcomes' careful tourists! All ASBO's taken.

At Rowley the trail narrows to the typical barrier blocked, glass strewn urban sprawl that local councils and Sustrans think we should put up with. At least the sculptures from here on in are awesome. Look out for the stainless steel telescopes at Consett, Old King Coal, the Transformers and the Steel Cows at Beamish. A recovery ale stop at the down at heel Beamish Mary Inn at the oddly named 'No Place' provided welcome respite from the trash strewn cycle route.

The last few miles from Consett, through Stanley, Washington and Sunderland would take about an hour and a half on a road route, but due to the vandalism, missing signs and a bizarrely convoluted route through Sunderland resulted in the time taken to be even longer. Next time I will take the road and not use the aforementioned vandalized, litter strewn, glass covered muggers paradise that passes for a national cycle way in these parts. I wanted to time our trip through these parts when the local ASBO trainees were still in bed or in glue sniff heaven, but due to the route slowing the traveller down so often through the oddly shaped barriers and in totally bizarre ways we ended up going through Washington a bit later than planned. It was school chucking out time when we came under attack. We were cycling under a bridge when bricks came down from above. The thick scum couldn't even get that right as their aim was put well off thanks to dodging commando style through the hail, could have been nasty though. Welcome to the North East. Wearside welcomes careful tourists!

Tempers were not improved as due to the average street drinking scum's inability to walk 3 feet to a bin, when the glass claimed it's first victim, (me), one mile from the end. My cycling buddy became the second a moment later with a slow puncture.

At last the University of Sunderland and the Marina on the Weir hove into view and the tour was over. A stunning journey over some of the most beautiful landscape in these isles. Wordsworth may have wandered lonely as a cloud in the Lake District, it's just a pity his modern relatives can't take their rubbish home with them in Sunderland and Whitehaven.

However, if you are staying in Sunderland and you're bikes are in safe storage (do not leave on the streets!), Sunderland and Newcastle city centers are well worth a wander around. Both cities having undergone major investment and extensive regeneration.

At Consett I would strongly recommend the single traveller to take a road route into Sunderland or do the traverse in these parts in the early morning. He or she can always go back onto the trail to see the sculptures. Any one else crossing these parts should also consider going in groups in the morning – that or go armed.

However you do the crossing, take plenty of inner tubes as you as well as you will need these from Consett onwards.

All pubs quoted are in the 2007 Camra Good Beer Guide.
All accommodation is on the C2C website.

All opinions are those of the author and not C2C, Sustrans or the owners of this website.

The crossing was completed by the author on a Giant XTC EX hardtail MTB, with Nokian NBX lite tyres. No special preparations were made to the bike other than adding a rack to carry shoes and wet weather clothing. All other luggage was carried in a Vaude 20+5 rucksack.

The other bikes were a Giant XTC 4 hardtail MTB with panniers and a free very old MTB bike with a new chain!

Total mileage traveled 145 miles.

Average speed (on the bike speed) 11.1 mph.

Total riding time (bike time) 24 hours.

Punctures – 2 on 2 out of 3 bikes.