

Hadrian's Wall Path

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As the weather warms and the ground becomes less boggy, the National Trails that crisscross Great Britain grow busier as we head to the great outdoors. One such Trail is Hadrian's Wall Path, stretching across the north of England from Wallsend, Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the east to Bowness-on-Solway in Cumbria on the west coast.



Adam Cuerden, Milecastle 39 on Hadrian's Wall, near Steel Rigg, looking east from a ridge along the Hadrian's Wall Path. Public Domain.

The 84 mile (135 km) long route follows the line of the Hadrian's Wall UNESCO World Heritage Site. Some walkers take a route east to west (in the direction the wall was built) or west to east (recommended for favourable weather conditions and easier inclines), other walkers go for day outings along sections of the wall while visitors head to many of the Roman fort museums and other attractions in the area.



Roman Baths at Chesters on the banks of the North Tyne © Anna Cusack.

Hadrian's Wall was started in 122 CE (2022 was the 1900-year anniversary) and took at least six years to build. Around 15,000 men, roughly three legions, were tasked with its creation. Named after and created for Emperor Hadrian Aelius who came to power in 117 CE the wall marked the northern frontier of the Roman Empire. The soldiers were positioned along the wall at every Roman mile, which was marked by a milecastle. They were drawn from many areas of the Roman Empire, some from as far afield as Romania, North Africa, and Syria. People constantly crisscrossed the wall as did livestock and this was controlled and probably taxed by the Roman soldiers assigned to these posts. In 140 the Romans pushed further north to the Antonine Wall (built of turf) but by 158 had returned to Hadrian's Wall. The Wall was attacked in 180 but continued to hold the northern tribes at bay. There is nothing quite like the Wall anywhere else in the Roman Empire. It was maintained for roughly 300 years until in 410 when the Romans left Britain.



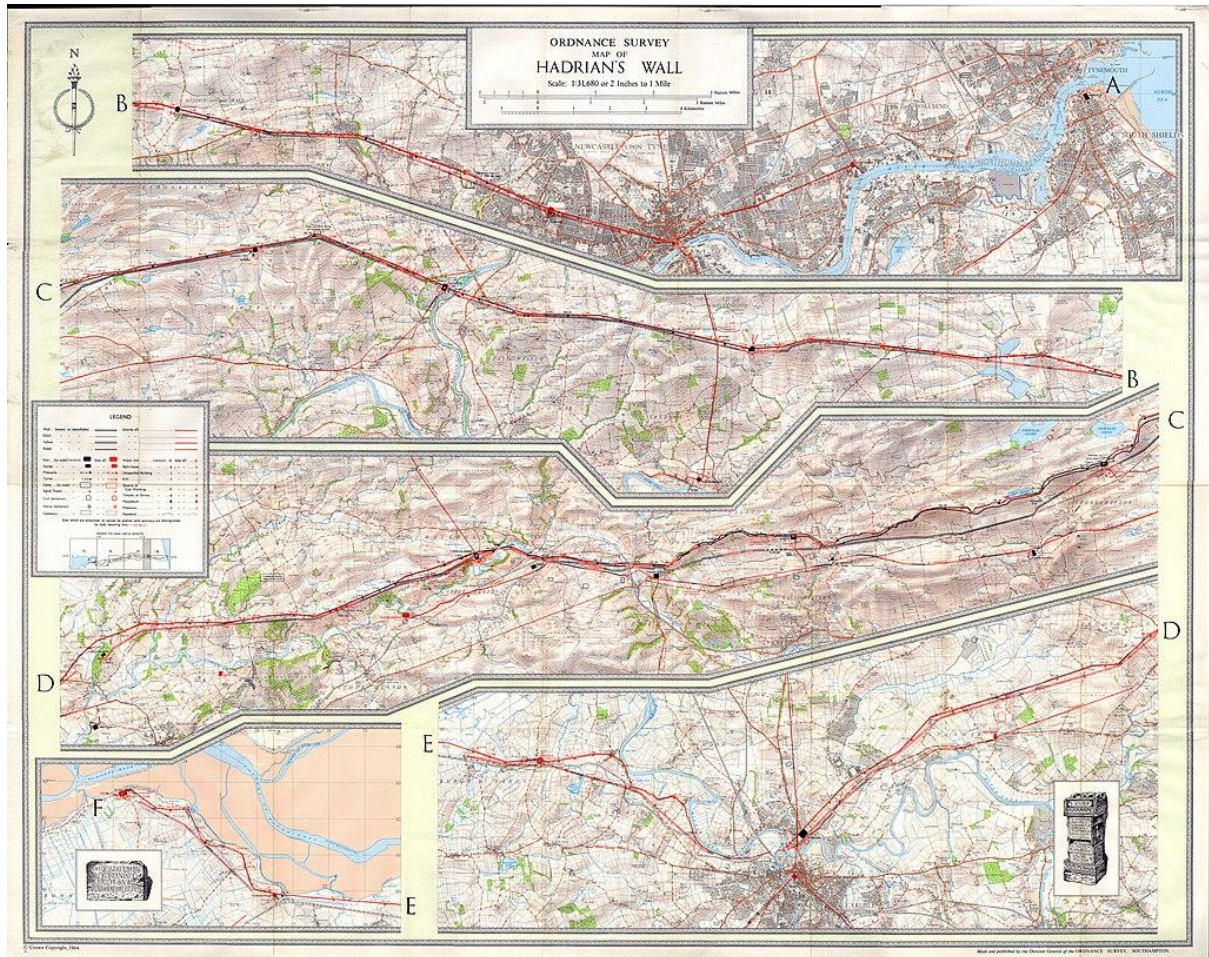
The Wall in Northumberland ©Anna Cusack.

The Wall became a quarry for stone that was used in buildings nearby, such as castles and churches, until the nineteenth century.¹ It was in the nineteenth century that early archaeologists and historians such as John Clayton, John Hodgson and John Collingwood Bruce, turned their attention to protecting the remains of Hadrian's Wall and studying its history.² It was also at this time that the idea of the wall forming a national trail was born. By 1987 the Wall was named a World Heritage

¹ The above summary is well known and covered in many books and posts about Hadrian's Wall including the English Heritage website, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/hadrians-wall/hadrians-wall-history-and-stories/>

² <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/hadrians-wall/hadrians-wall-history-and-stories/history/research/>

Site. It was only in May 2003 that a National Trail finally came to be realised through a collaboration between Natural England and English Heritage.³ It became the fifteenth National Trail in England. The path itself attempts to follow as closely as possible to the Wall, though only around ten per cent of the structure is visible today.



Ordnance Survey map of Hadrian's Wall, published in 1964. A revised and updated edition was published in 2010. Public Domain.

It was after the Second World War, when fears that post-war development might cause the destruction of some of the English landscape that the establishment of National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and Long-Distance Routes (now called National Trails in England and Wales) were born. In 1965 the Pennine Way, the very first of these new trails was opened. Hadrian's Wall Path crosses and shares the route of the Way for a section. Every National Trail has a partnership with local authorities. A dedicated Officer or Manager of the Trail is responsible for keeping the route safe and carrying out maintenance together with local highway authorities, landowners and many wonderful volunteers.⁴

Like all walks across the English countryside, care must be taken, especially due to the age of many of the ruins that are passed along the route. Walk side by side, not in single file to avoid erosion,

³ Mark Richards, *Walking Hadrian's Wall Path: National Trail Described West-East and East-West* (2015), 13.

⁴ https://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/en_GB/trails/

keep off the Wall and other ruins, leave gates as you find them, take all rubbish with you, and adhere to the notices and diversions that might be signposted.

Walking through history in a way like that offered by Hadrian's Wall Path provides valuable insights and understanding of the landscape and its stories. You can immerse yourself in the physicality of history in a tangible and imaginative way that is hard to grasp by simply reading a textbook. Put your feet on the ground, walk the footsteps of those that have gone before you.

References and Resources:

[Hadrian's Wall: History and Stories | English Heritage](#)

[Hadrian's Wall Path - National Trails](#)

Martin Howe, *Tales from the Big Trails: A forty-year quest to walk the iconic long-distance trails of England, Scotland and Wales* (2021)

Mark Richards, *Walking Hadrian's Wall Path: National Trail Described West-East and East-West* (2015)

Tony Wilmott (ed.), *Hadrian's Wall: Archaeological Research by English Heritage 1976-2000* (2009)

W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (1985)