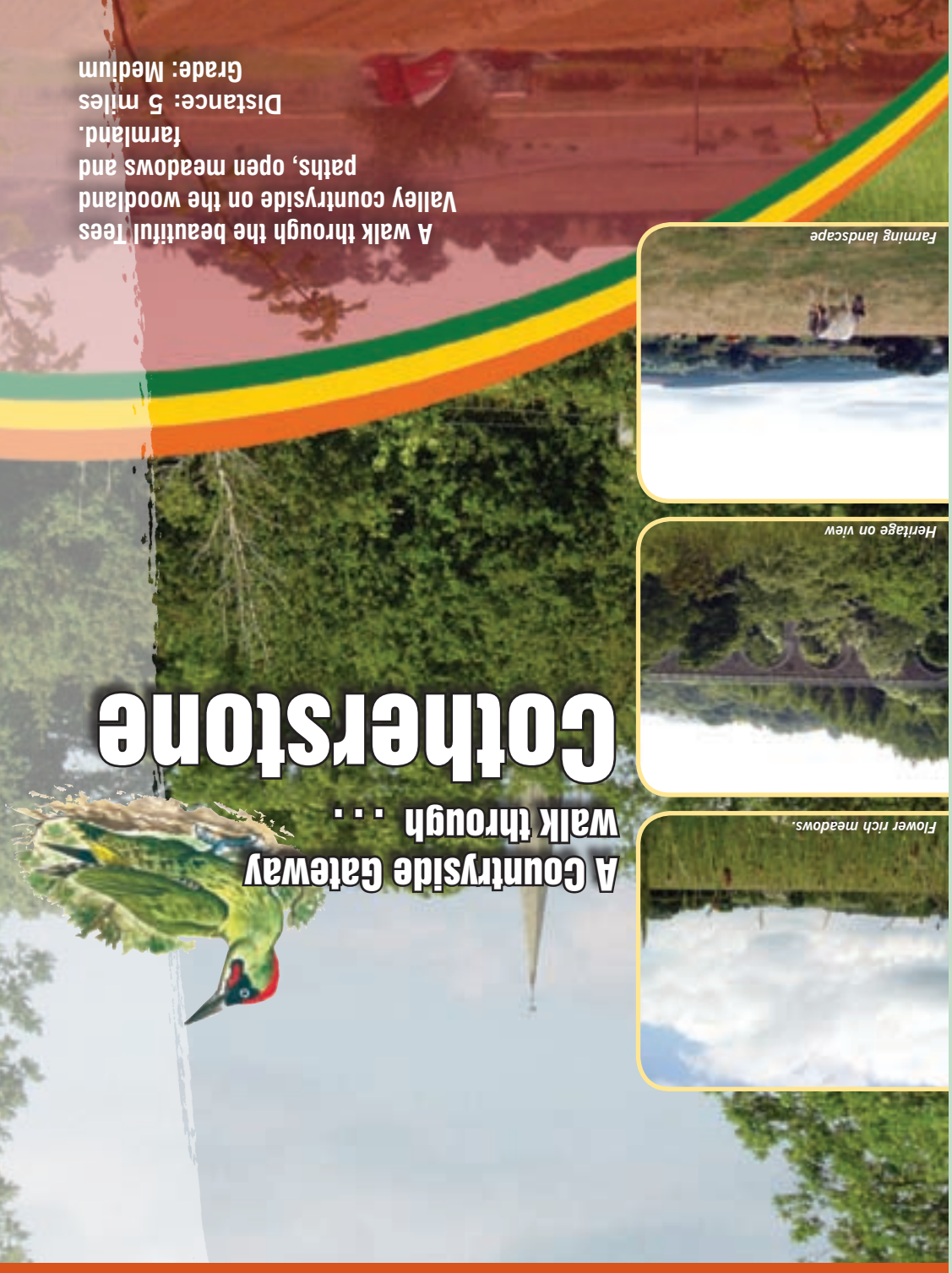
A Countryside Gateway walk through . . .

Cotherstone



Flower rich meadows.

Heritage on view

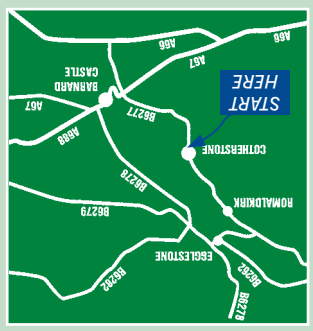
Farming landscape

A walk through the beautiful Tees Valley countryside on the woodland paths, open meadows and farmland.
Distance: 5 miles
Grade: Medium

Opening doors to a forever changing countryside

How to get there

Cotherstone is approximately 52 miles from Newcastle, 40 miles from Durham and 20 miles from Darlington.



What are the Countryside Gateway series of walks all about?

These walks follow a trail through public rights of way, permissive paths and bridleways, over farmland and countryside throughout the north east of England. They offer an opportunity to experience the wonderful landscapes in our region and to witness, first-hand, the efforts of the people who live and work in them. In some cases you will be walking through a landscape that has been farmed by the same family for generations and this offers unrivalled opportunities to learn about some of the methods of conservation taking place and how modern farming practices are offering new opportunities for tourism, conservation and commerce.

We hope that these walks will provide you with an insight into how Defra and its partners are working with farmers and landowners to protect the features that are important for the countryside - for its people and its wildlife. Defra has initiated schemes that create a direct link for agriculture and the environment to work in harmony protecting both jobs, countryside heritage and the environment. Other schemes are helping farmers and rural businesses diversify into areas such as providing high quality produce, recreation and tourism.

"From silent Spring to the march of the seasons, each buzzing with biodiversity. A decade of vision and action that is slowly but surely putting wildflowers and wildlife back into the countryside of England, thanks to a dynamic partnership of farmers, and government and non governmental organisations large and small. Common sense, and information and technology transfer now paves the way ahead for a farmed environment with all the benefits of soils, landscapes and rural communities once again in good heart."

David Bellamy, Bedburn, March 2002

For more information about this walk and others in the series, please contact:

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Tel: 0191 229 5500 Email: enquiries.northeast@defra.gsi.gov.uk

Our thanks go to our partners: The Countryside Agency, Durham County Council, Northumberland County Council, English Nature, English Heritage and the Ramblers Association.

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Design, production and interpretation by: Differentia Ltd, 0191 2332330.
Illustration by Steve Pardue. Photography by Steve Pardue and Jim Miner.

Redstarts and cheese

The history of cheese making in the Dales goes back to Roman times with the dales of Tees, Swale and Wensleydale being foremost in this. Most of the cheese from this area was originally made with ewe's milk, and would have borne little resemblance to today's cheese. Between the dissolution of the monasteries and the 17th century there was a change towards cow's milk from Shorthorn herds being used, and so the cheese became more like the Dales cheeses we are familiar with now.

Cotherstone cheese was probably a descendant of Wensleydale, and may have been made in the 17th century. Later, in the 19th century, this sort of cheese proved popular with provision merchants, as it could be kept for a whole year. The fat moist properties of the cheese encouraged the growth of green moulds. The resulting blue cheese was highly prized in the last century.

The village name of Cotherstone was only given to the cheese early this century.

Immaculate hedgerows at West Park

The most famous maker of Cotherstone was Mrs Birkett, cheese maker at West Park until 1940, who was very keen to make the distinction between Cotherstone and Wensleydale cheeses. Mrs Birkett was probably responsible for the rise in popularity of Cotherstone as a cheese in its own right.

...not an exact science...

At the turn of the century, virtually every farmers' wife in the Dale made cheese for the family. No doubt, each one was slightly different. Even today Cotherstone cheese can taste different on any given day - even though the milk may be from the same herd of cows.

...ancient woods

As you walk the fields past Shipley and Great Woods you can't help but be entranced by the tantalising view of an ancient woodland site.

An ancient woodland is land continuously wooded since AD1600 in England and Wales or AD1750 in Scotland. This resource cannot increase and is irreplaceable. Since the 1930's almost half of ancient broadleaved woodland in England and Wales has been planted with conifers or cleared for agriculture. More than 8 out of 10 ancient woods in England and Wales are less than 20 hectares, only 501 exceed 100 hectares and a mere 14 are larger than 300 hectares. Although some woods are designated for their scientific and conservation importance this does not guarantee protection or ensure positive management.

Enchanted woodland

Ancient woodlands support a diversity of wildlife including nationally rare or declining species and this particular site is one of the most important woodland sites in the north east of England.

If you sit on the grassy banks looking across the valley towards Balder Grange, you may be lucky enough to spot a small, robin-like bird flitting out of the woodland, bobbing up and down on a fence post, then darting back into the safety of the wood. Look carefully for bright orange-red as it flies off. This is a redstart which is on the Amber list as species with unfavourable conservation status in Europe where it is declining.

The breeding males have slate grey upper parts, black faces and wings, and an orange rump and chest. Females and young are duller. These smart little birds nest in holes, typically in old trees, a charasteristic of ancient woodland habitat.

...and what about the railway

The Tees Valley Railway Path is a 10km long path set in the attractive countryside of Teesdale. The path starts near the village of Lonton, passing through or near Mickleton, Romaldkirk, Cotherstone and ends near Lartington.

The Railway was the remnant of a scheme for a line from Barnard Castle to Alston. It was opened in 1868 by an independent company and was taken over by the North Eastern Railway in 1882. There are great views along the entire length of the walk, revealing a wooded pastoral landscape. This is characterised by a patchwork of small fields bounded by dry stone walls and hedges dotted with trees.

Just before reaching Cotherstone, you will cross over the tall nine-arched Balder Viaduct which spans a deep river valley. It was built in 1848 for the Tees Valley Railway Company. When the Tees Valley Railway opened, Cotherstone became a popular holiday resort. Apartment houses, tea rooms and shops flourished. Although today only the Post Office remains. However there are two busy pubs serving good food, including of course Cotherstone cheese, traditionally eaten with stout - try with a cup of tea - its still good!

The Mill

1. Park on the main street - near the Red Lion pub - the walk starts opposite the school just before the village green on Demesne Lane. Look for a house which is called Featherstone House just past the village green. Walk down the lane and stay on the lane ignoring the signpost and yellow arrow which points left just as you walk down the lane. As you walk past gardens on the right look left for a sign to The Mill through a gate. Follow the farm track through the field which is an Environmentally Sensitive Area.

As you walk up the track enjoy the sound of skylarks, note the variety of grasses and meadow flowers in the field and look to the right at the drystone wall and ancient farm buildings including a bastle. Also note the hedgerows here which are managed under a Countryside Stewardship Agreement (CSS) - this encourages a diversity of wildlife to flourish from hedgehogs to butterflies.

Historic buildings restored

2. At the end of the track is another gate which takes you onto the Teesdale Way for a short while. Go through the gate and turn left keeping the fence on your left.

As you walk along the Teesdale Way look down towards the River Tees meandering through the farm. This is Mrs Taylor's farm which runs a number of projects which includes hedgerow restoration and maintaining meadows and pastures for wildlife diversity. You only have to notice the myriad of meadow grasses, buttercups and flowers to see the Stewardship Scheme in action. The farm here has an interesting history. It was bought by a charitable trust many years ago to look after farmers and their families that had fallen on hard times. The plaque at the top of the hill commemorates one of the founders of this charity. The farm is still held in trust to this day. Mrs Taylor in keeping with many farmers has diversified to include holiday accommodation.

The lovely veronica

Do you like butter?

3. Cross a stile into a field walking past a shed which may have an old red Massey Ferguson tractor in it. Soon after this shed is another stile which takes you back onto a track - look for the yellow arrow pointing down towards some steps. Follow this path through the undergrowth and down to the steps towards a track which heads to the river. Cross a small footbridge over the burn here.

Smell the woodland and hedgerow plants including sweet cicely (aniseed) and ramsons (garlic). Under the trees the shade loving wood sorrel (shamrock) flourishes.

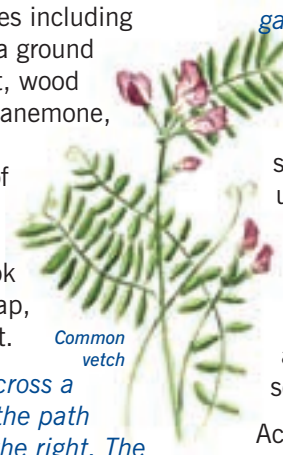
4. After a short while there is another footbridge on the right - ignore this and carry straight on the Teesdale Way. This is a popular bathing spot for local people enjoying the shallows of the river Tees. Cross a stile and head towards a stone

Skylark

Biodiversity at Doe Park

wall.

As you walk through the meadow note the little purple flowers of veronica (speedwell) among the grasses and buttercups. On the right there is a woodland of oak and looking across the river valley you can see the wooded banks of Baldersdale which is a Site of Special Scientific Interest. This woodland and Shipley Wood includes some ancient woodland and is one of the most important woodland sites in the north east. Among the limestone soils there is a diversity of species including wych elm, ash, holly with a ground flora of wood forget-me-not, wood cranesbill, ramsons, wood anemone, sanicle and the rare broad leaved helleborine. Some of these species can be seen among the woodland on your right as you walk. Look out in particular for blackcap, pied flycatcher and redstart.


Common vetch

5. At the end of this field cross a stile over a fence - follow the path keeping the woodland on the right. The path descends to a small burn - cross the stepping stones into a field and head across it towards a gate to the right of a small stone building and walled garden. Go past this and head towards a house on the right. Staying in this field, keep the hedge to your right until you come to a small field gate. Go through the gate and follow a farm track past a house on the right. Just before a gate turn left and head down the field keeping the fence to your right. As you go into the woodland turn left and follow the path over a small bridge over the burn. As you cross the bridge turn left continuing through the woodland.

The woodland here has ash, hazel, hawthorn and wych hazel as well as red campion. Listen for dunnock singing in the

Walled garden

trees and look for blackcap.

The drystone walls you are passing have recently been restored. The sandstone used for this makes for great walling stone. You can see the square edges to the stones which helps the stones to fit together neatly - although it is still backbreaking work to build them!

Also in the field is evidence of the 'rig and furrow' undulations in the field. These are signs of a time when the field would have been ploughed using horses or even oxen.

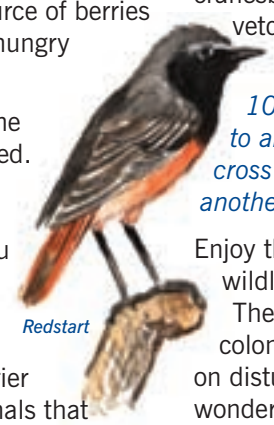
As you pass the high wall you will notice that the orchard here has some newly planted trees in it. This has been restored with the help of the Countryside Stewardship Scheme. At one time most farms would have an orchard, not all as grand as this one but, nevertheless all add to the importance of heritage in our landscape. This particular orchard will be revitalised for future generations.

6. At the top of the hill go through a gate into a field of "swishy grass" towards Thwaite Hall. Head towards the trees in the distance. The path is overgrown with meadow grasses maintained under a Stewardship Agreement. After the wood keep the hedge to your left. As you reach a stone wall go through a gate past some houses on the left. Head down towards the main road.

7. Turn left onto the main road and walk towards a stone bridge over the river Balder. Across the road is a yellow arrow pointing through a wooden gate. Follow this and head across the field towards woodland with the river Balder on the left. Head up the hill towards the woodland and go through a wooden gate keeping the fence to your left. Follow the line of the fence, keeping the woodland to your left you will go through a caravan park and on to open grass fields. The path takes you through a gate in to the park and then on a grass track through another gate with once again woodland on your left. Then across a stile into another field.

On this part of the walk you will see some hedges that could be restored under the CSS. Planting new hedge plants would help create a stock proof barrier. However, nature is all about diversity and old hedgerow trees such as these provide a rich source of berries and insects. A feast for a hungry songbird.

Across the valley you see some hedges that have been restored. Here Mr Birkett has used the CSS to help him fund restoration work in 1997. You can now see a wonderful thick hedge developing, ideal for small mammals to find shelter. Also providing a barrier to the larger 'woollier' mammals that you will see in these fields!


Redstart

Restored hedgerows

On the right across the river Balder there are fabulous views of the woodland which occupies the steep slopes of the river. This SSSI is another important site for ancient and semi-natural woodland. In particular look out for redstart darting out from the woodland to chase insects and then back into the woodland. Peer through the undergrowth at the foxglove and ferns. Across the valley you can see Balder Grange nestled amongst the woodland.

8. As you near the end of the path look towards the viaduct over the river Balder. Go through a wooden gate into another field. This is an ideal spot for a picnic on the grassy slopes looking over the valley. At the end of the path is another gate which takes you down steps onto the disused railway path and then turn left onto the Tees Railway Path. Cross the viaduct and enjoy the stunning views down into the Balder.

Enjoy the wonderful meadows either side and in particular note the hedgerows and the variety of flowers and grasses. These hedgerows are wonderful examples of good farming practice by Mr Birkett and with the Countryside Stewardship Scheme helping towards the cost of this. Watch the bees and butterflies flitting amongst the grasses and buttercups, saxifrage and dog rose.

Water avens

Pyramidal orchid

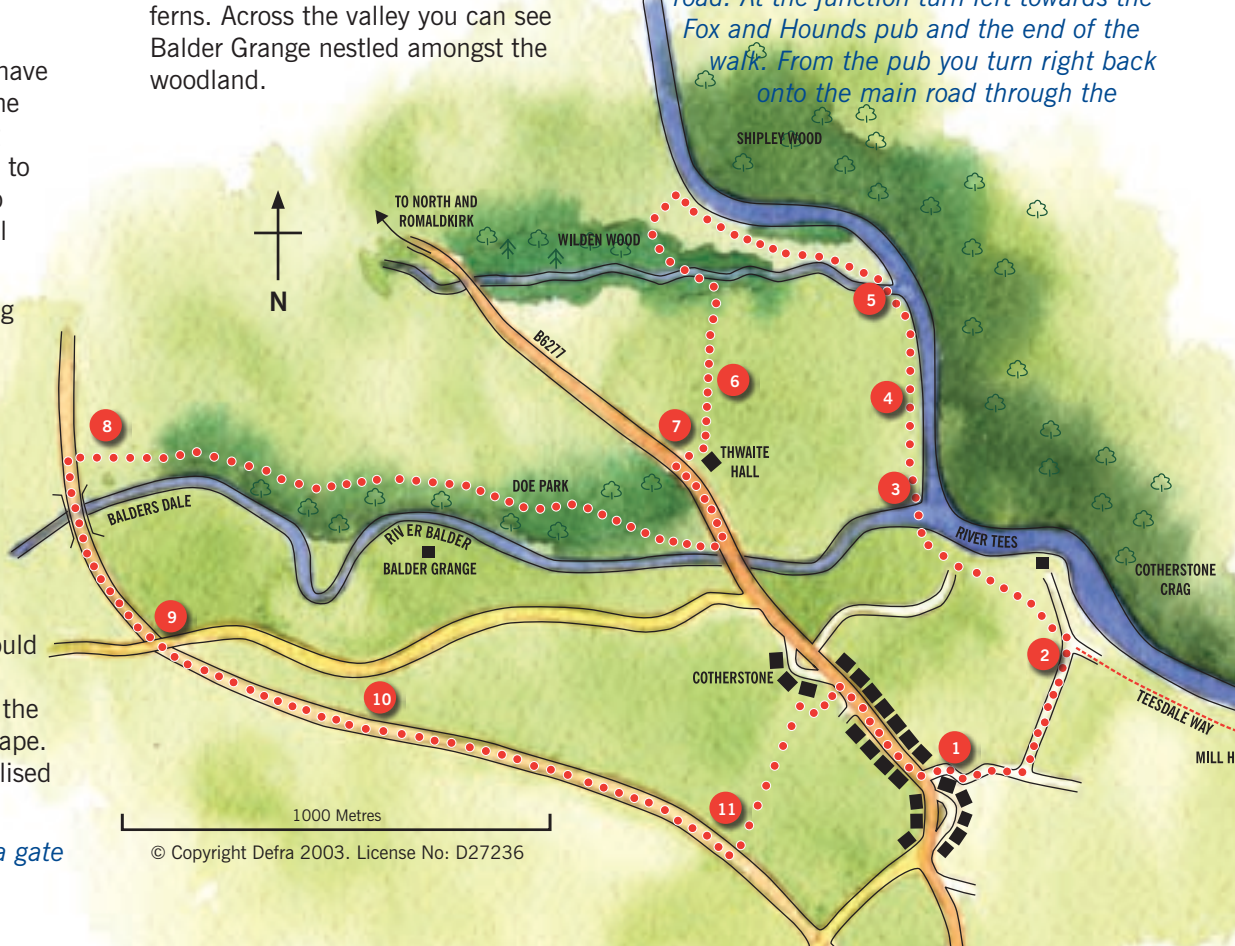
9. Go through a wooden gate and cross a road and then through another gate. Then on through another gate - cross a track and through a gate back onto the Tees Railway Path.

Look for swallows darting among the trees and cranesbills, water avens and vetch either side of the track.

10. Continuing on the path you come to another gate - go through this and cross a farm track and then through another gate back onto the railway path.

Enjoy the wonderful variety of hedgerow wildlife and once again look for redstart. These little robin like birds are colonising brownfield sites and flourish on disturbed land. This railway path is a wonderful example of a once industrial use being taken back by nature. The verges are profuse with flowers and look carefully for orchids such as pyramidal. Also look at the tangled vetches with their pea-like flowers, the water avens sprouting tall out of the damp ditches. Listen for grasshoppers clicking in the grasses. And look for orange tipped butterflies.

11. Carry on the track and look towards the left at some of the Birketts fields and look for the miniature ponies grazing in the meadows. Eventually you come to a large ladder stile on the left which takes you into a field. The railway path carries on straight towards the main road at Low Lathbury. Cross the stile into the field and head under the pylons towards the Cotherstone. At the end of the field is a small gate through the stone wall. Go through this and turn right onto a small road. At the junction turn left towards the Fox and Hounds pub and the end of the walk. From the pub you turn right back onto the main road through the



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