



# West Cumbria Road Trip#1: North

## The Lake District and West Cumbria

This is a view through and under the span of [Greta Bridge on the A66 bypass at Keswick](#) that would not have existed were it not for West Cumbria - the ugly, dirty, industrial and polluting other half of the Lake District National Park. To stop in Keswick and take up the vantage point of this image is to see something like a life-size and living diorama that reveals the multiple temporal layers of the Cumbrian landscape. In the far distance are the celebrated mountains, the remains of geological forces that shaped the landscape millions of years ago; closer yet the managed landscape of trees and houses amongst which Samuel Taylor Coleridge would, for a time, find a home and - with his friend William Wordsworth - help to forge a romantic consciousness that would, in turn, produce such a thing

as the idea of a "National Park", and finally the concrete brutality of the 20th century road and bridge, passage to the industrial west.

In the late 1960s, the main road that passed through the Lake District at Keswick was the A594, which occupied most of the route of today's A66. It had had been one of a number of old "trunk routes" that that were scheduled to be upgraded at the end of the 1960s to accommodate greater and faster flows of traffic as the number of vehicles using the nation's roads increased. As far as the planned improvements to the A66 were concerned, it should not have been so easy to impose this modernist vision in the celebrated landscape of the Lake District, which was protected from developments that might alter its character by its National Park status (awarded in 1951).

The main justification for extending the A66 was to save the port towns in West Cumbria, the subject of this guide, which had been left shattered by a wave of de-industrialisation that hit Britain in the mid-to-late 1960s. At the close of a public inquiry into the planned road in 1972, when the UK government did battle with objectors, it was argued that this structure would, in the end, make a positive contribution to the aesthetic appreciation of the National Park. Today it bears a plaque that was unveiled in 1999 recording the fact that it had been voted Britain's "[Best Concrete Engineering Structure](#)" of the 20th century.

But, as alien or unwelcome presences in a venerated landscape, the road and bridge, might - then - be regarded as outgrowths of West Cumbria.



## Workington

The A66 terminates in Workington - not at the coast, but rather at a set of traffic lights, beyond which lies a pedestrianised shopping area, the [Washington Square Shopping Centre](#). One route into this newer part of the town on foot is past a steel sculpture made of railway tracks fashioned into a kind of Doric column. This work, titled '[Curwen's Column](#)' - named after John Christian Curwen, MP for the town in the late 18th and early 19th century - was made by Edward Allington and unveiled in 2007. It reflects Workington's history as an industrial town, and as a centre for the making of railway tracks. In fact, it used to be said that Workington steel had been shipped so far and wide that it probably enwrapped the entire globe, its railway lines connecting and bringing people together all around the world.

At the point where the A66 ends, the road is flanked by two historic attractions - the old town ([Portland Square](#), above), which preserves handsome Georgian houses, colour-washed in the Cumbrian style, and [Workington Hall](#), a large manor house, now fallen into ruin. The latter is nestled within a park, on the opposite side of the A66, and partly obscured by trees. Workington Hall was the seat of the Curwen family - the merchants who built-up the town as a rival to Whitehaven following the discovery of coal in the 18th century.

A 1794 account of an event that marked the opening of a new pit gives a sense of the importance of coal to the people of the town: "On Friday, about noon, the Sisterly Society went in procession to the pit," reported the *Cumberland Paquet*. "These were followed by the miners, dressed in white flannel suits

- the Honourable Society - the Friendly Society - the seamen - Mrs. Curwen and another lady in phaeton - nine other carriages; several post-chaises also attended. Two marquees were pitched, and wine and cake were provided for all who chose to partake; several barrels of ale were also broached, and given to the populace. The procession surrounded the pit, which was then named Lady Pit, in the presence of several thousands, who rent the air with three times three huzzas."

A celebration suitable to be revived as an annual event in our own heritage-obsessed days, perhaps. Two streets behind Portland Square on Park End Road is the [Helena Thompson Museum](#), which houses many artefacts from Workington's history. To reach the coast, and the location of the above mentioned celebration, the visitor should head for the Port of Workington.



## Workington - Port and Beach

This is a landscape - once identifiable as industrial Chapel Bank and its shore and pier - found behind the railway station and beyond the [Derwent Howe strip mall](#), where a real sense of West Cumbria's geographic location can be obtained. Over and across the Irish Sea and the Solway Firth flowed the economic and cultural connections that helped to forge modern West Cumbria.

It formed part of what one of the founders of the discipline of geography, Halford Mackinder, referred to as a "British Mediterranean." This place - West Cumbria - was a place that rose up on the land because of the close proximity of Scotland, Ireland and other places on what - before Ireland gained independence - Mackinder referred to as "Britain's Inland Sea."

Workington might otherwise not seem to be a seaside town, but it is. Here, on land that was once where the previously mentioned Lady Pit could be found - its working seams extended under the sea, until it was flooded in an 1837 disaster - and where steel works and railway lines later ran right up to the edge of the land, there can be found numerous [locational markers](#), as shown in the above image. These are intended as aids to vessels as they navigate the narrow channel into port during changing tidal conditions. For the non-seafaring visitor, though, they have something of the quality of abstract sculptures that have been left dotted around the landscape.

This area, which is on the opposite side of the river Derwent from the working port of today, has been redesigned to be accessible to walkers - there are pathways and benches around the well-hidden

Workington marina, and views back towards the town and a section of quayside homes. Further out towards the edge of the landscape is a structure that looks like a displaced watchtower from Checkpoint Charlie in Cold War Berlin. This is the [end of the C2C, coast to coast / sea to sea, cycle route](#). A path leads directly onto the structure, which has a walkway around on two levels, from which there are great views of the coastline and the rocky pier that extends out to a singular point right here.

One of the main attractions of this place is the artificial hill to the south of the car park - a former slag heap - known as [How Michael](#), which affords views across the Solway to the Scottish coast (Criffel is just visible in the lower right of this image) and another perspective on the coastline of West Cumbria, from Maryport to St Bees Head.



**Top:** Cyclists on Workington beach dipping their wheels in the water before setting out on the coast-to-coast route. **Bottom:** a view of St John's church, Washington Street, Workington.



## Maryport

Once the site of one of the most westerly points of the Roman world - when it was known as Alauna - Maryport's modern town grid, inspired by Whitehaven and built in 1748-49, remains intact, and leads on to the quayside that opens out onto [Elizabeth Dock](#), where rusting and battered-looking working boats that could be extras from some contemporary pirate movie idle just yards away from the new apartments that occupy two sides of the harbour. The newer marina with berths for small pleasure boats lies beyond, and is to be found by walking around Elizabeth Dock or crossing at the Ellenfoot Bridge pedestrian crossing.

The [Senhouse Museum](#) with its Roman artefacts lies just outside the town centre on a hill that looks back over the harbour. This is now a part

of the [UNESCO World Heritage Landscape, 'Frontiers of the Roman World'](#). While remains of Hadrian's Wall are extant, the defensive structures that extended from the end of the wall at Bowness-on-Solway down the Cumbrian coast - a series of signal stations or mileforts - have long since vanished, a modern wooden replica of one of the structures can be seen at the Senhouse Museum. Of interest inside is a series of altar stones, some recently discovered nearby dedicated to Jupiter and other gods of that vanished world.

Down by the harbour some maritime echoes of a more contemporary nature can be found on and around [Tongue Pier](#), where two recent examples of public art have left their mark. The first is in the form of ceramic tiles inlaid on the North Harbour flood defence wall, starting at Tongue Pier, which show a series

of images of Maryport and its hinterland - these are images of waves, Roman artefacts, and details of old maps of the area. Alongside this work the words of local schoolchildren - written in couplets or in the form of fragmentary word images - have been carved into pieces of stone that are set amidst the stone paving of Tongue Pier:

*Grubby seagulls*

*Hot sand singeing the soles of my feet*

*My head is 1000 miles from here*

*Dead crabs stare at passing cars*

These words are perhaps best contemplated on a sunny day after a walk around the harbour and marina, with an [ice cream or snack from the kiosk](#) ('Her Citi on the Pier', an outpost of Her Citi, a boutique cafe in town) located next to the Ellenfoot Bridge.



## Allonby

Or Allonby on the Cumbrian Riviera as some locals in the nearby Jack's [Surf Bar](#) - food and drinks served daily - might prefer. It is probably better known now as a stop along the route of the [Frontiers of the Roman Empire World Heritage Landscape](#) than as a resort on some vanished British Mediterranean. Allonby was once a notable tourist destination, or *watering place* to use a term that was popular in guidebooks of the late 18th and 19th century. It benefited from the surge of interest in Romantic encounters with nature and the elements. What Allonby offered was proximity to the sea - stormy waters a particular lure - and a rough shoreline suitable for walking amongst the dunes and over the sands when the tide was out, taking in the impressive views across the [Solway Firth to Criffel](#) on the Scottish side of the water.

In *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices*, a fictionalised retelling of a walking tour of Cumberland taken by [Charles Dickens](#) (Francis Goodchild in the story) and [Wilkie Collins](#) (Thomas Idle) in 1857, the resort is spied on a map and enthusiastically identified as the perfect destination, “the most delicious piece of sea-coast to be found within the limits of England, Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, and the Channel Islands,” according to its location on the map, the two men reasoned. It was bound to be possessed of “every luxury a watering place could offer an idle man.” As they approached by coach from nearby Aspatria, Idle called out to his friend, who had stuck his head out of the carriage window in anticipation of a view of the great sea-bathing resort, impatient to know if they had arrived yet:

“Do you see Allonby?”

“I don’t see it yet,” said Francis, looking out of the window.

“It must be there,” said Thomas Idle.

“I don’t see it,” returned Francis.

“It must be there,” repeated Thomas Idle, fretfully. “Lord bless me! ... I suppose this is it!”

“A watering-place,” retorted Thomas Idle, with the pardonable sharpness of an invalid, “can’t be five gentlemen in straw hats, four ladies in hats, three geese in a dirty little brook before them.”

Today, Allonby feels not unlike the place described by Dickens and Collins, yet it remains a must-see simply because of its uniqueness, its beach, the Victorian [Reading Room](#) (pictured above) by Alfred Waterhouse - who designed London’s Natural History Museum -and not least for the sense that will surely overcome you of discovering a fossil from some lost world.



## Silloth

Silloth is a place of unusually wide streets, its main thoroughfares comprising sett-paved surfaces that - as well as its picturesque location and townscape - have lured the Tour of Britain cycle race to the town. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Silloth – a resort town created by a railway company in the 1850s – was as popular with tourists as any of the main Lake District resorts, yet it owed none of its success to proximity to that other Cumbria. Rather, it drew its visitors as much from southern Scotland (from the Solway coast towns and along the Borders’ train routes from Carlisle to Edinburgh) as it did from other parts of Cumbria and northern England.

The railway line to Carlisle, which carried the vast majority of its visitors, fell under Dr Beeching’s axe

in 1964, and the town thereafter lost some of its vitality.

From Criffel Street, where one can find cafes, bars and other attractions - such as the mysterious-looking (on the outside, at least) **Toy Soldier Museum** - the view is of an expansive public space. **Silloth Green**, the focal point in the summer months for a variety of funfairs, festivals and other entertainments, affords ample space for picnics, as well as play areas and paddle pools for children. All around the evidence of a carefully designed and planted landscape, including a Bee Garden and Edwardian public toilets, is clear to see. Silloth, like Venice, California – a place comprised of out-of-place colonnades and canals – was a kind of postmodern place before the term had even been invented. In its 19th century heyday it looked – and still does today – like nothing else in Cumbria.

As seen above, the Green is partially bounded by trees, amongst which sits the iconic **Pagoda**. On the other side is the impressive and very long concrete-stepped promenade, which affords a place for people to sit and take in the sun and - of course - the view over the Solway Firth. From Silloth, along the promenade, there is a short walk to the nearby **East Cote Lighthouse** at Skinburness. Skinburness had always been a place that existed dangerously on the edge of the coast throughout its history, and modern homes are still to be found close to the edge of the shoreline, separated only by a road.

## EVENTS

**Silloth Green Day**, last weekend in May; **Silloth Carnival**, August Bank Holiday Monday.



**Top:** On Criffel St Silloth Christ Church stands in the middle of the Italianate terraces that give the town a feel of being out of place.  
**Bottom:** a view across the Solway Firth to Criffel in Galloway.