



**Clockwise from top left:** All smiles on day one, departing Workington. Cycle path approaching the Tyne and Wear urban area. Instead of heading across Lake District hills, Hadrian's Cycleway tracks the Solway Firth. Hagg Bank Bridge, a former railway bridge over the Tyne near Wylam. Claire in the quiet lanes of the Solway Coast

of an off-road path. Claire the mountain goat practically hummed her way up it but I'd lost my momentum and had to get off and push. I like to think I looked suitably epic finally cresting that ascent in slow motion.

We enjoyed a sharp drop into Haltwhistle but not the 100m climb back up to our B&B. If you're staying at the Milecastle Inn or Bridge House B&B, both of which are on top of the hill beside the Military Road, I'd recommend skirting the town and instead staying on the flat Military Road that shadows Hadrian's Wall. We enjoyed a hearty dinner in the Milecastle Inn and some alcohol-free beer claiming to be isotonic, then fell into a deep sleep in our thankfully cool twin room.

After meeting our B&B owners' runner ducks the following morning, who produced our breakfast eggs, we cycled the short distance to Vindolanda. We arrived just ahead of opening time and stashed our bikes behind an outbuilding in the car park as bicycles and archaeology shall not mix, apparently. This Roman fortress predated even the wall, and we spent a good hour or so admiring the site and its remarkable finds, from jewellery to carts to shoes and the famous writing tablets. In Vindolanda the earliest example of a woman's



handwriting was discovered – a birthday party invitation. This showed these outposts of the empire housed families, not simply male soldiers.

There is also among the earliest examples of a public toilet, where users sat on a communal bench above a cleverly plumbed trough. Privacy is perhaps a modern concept. The fort was eventually abandoned and much of the remaining property was burned. In the damp soil the flames fizzled out, however, and the half-burned goods remained remarkably preserved. Today, an estimated 27% of the site has been excavated, and it's a race against time to discover the rest as hot summers, caused by global heating, dry the soil, exposing artefacts to the decaying effects of oxygen.

A final stiff climb after Vindolanda and we were on a broad road with fine views of rolling hills. After this we found ourselves whizzing down a seemingly endless series of descents to the outskirts of Newcastle. Despite the climbing, it felt like we enjoyed more descent than we'd banked by this point, and our final day's ride was punctuated with whoops of happiness – and no more rain.

We managed a final sandwich in a golf club on the outskirts of the city, right beside the path, then hopped on our train home. ●

### Getting there

You can start from Sellafield or Whitehaven train stations. We opted for the latter, having taken a morning train from London, leaving only an afternoon to reach our overnight stay. Starting further up the Cumbrian coast also avoided some clumsy sections of the National Cycle Network, or a potentially busy road, north of the nuclear power plant. We returned home from Newcastle upon Tyne station.