

WALKING IN THE SOUTHERN UPLANDS

44 BEST HILL DAYS IN SOUTHERN SCOTLAND

by Ronald Turnbull

CICERONE

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Route symbols on OS map extracts



For OS symbols key see OS maps

GPX files

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Front cover: Descending Merrick's Redstone Ridge towards Loch Enoch on Walk 5

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Scrambling on
Castle William



After a fairly steep descent the fence turns down left; here keep ahead on a quad-bike path northwest towards the rocky top of Craigbraneoch Hill. Ignore a waymark pointing left, and continue to the fine little summit of **Craigbraneoch Hill**.

These craggy slopes are ideal for **guerrilla warfare**. Robert the Bruce's small army hid out here after his victory at Glentroot (Walks 5–6). The English couldn't catch him, despite the dog-napping of Bruce's own sleuth-hound to help them.

A frustrated Edward I came north in person, but died on the journey. His son Edward II occupied Cumnock Castle. By continuing to evade this less effective Edward, the wily Bruce (the Nicola Sturgeon of the 14th century) started to make Scottish independence seem like a plausible cause – culminating at Bannockburn seven years later.

From Craigbraneoch head down steeply south, keeping to the left of any craggy ground. A strip of plantation masks the end of the **Afton Reservoir** dam – pass round its left corner for a path back along the reservoir shore to the dam end.

A track crosses the dam to a flagpole. Follow it to the left, alongside the reservoir, for 250 metres, to a junction. Turn sharply back right on a higher track to the edge of the forest.

After about 100 metres, bear right off the track down to the rocky knob **Castle William**. It can be surmounted in style by a slab scramble on its uphill side or easily walked up. About 50 metres south is the small William's Pinnacle, a very short scramble of its own.

Slant back uphill to rejoin the track. It slants down to pass above two little plantations and join the valley road just north of **Craigdarroch farm**. The Blackcraig track end is 1 km north along the road.

WALK 11

Criffel

Start/Finish	New Abbey (NY 964 663)
Distance	12km (7½ miles)
Ascent	600m (2000ft)
Approx time	4½hrs
Terrain	Good paths on the hill; valley path is partly overgrown and poorly waymarked
Max altitude	Criffel, 569m
Maps	Landranger 84 (Dumfries); Explorer 313 (Dumfries)
Public transport	Bus 372 (Dumfries–Dalbeattie)
Parking	Large car park at Sweetheart Abbey; also very limited parking at the Criffel lane end (NY 956 654)
Variant	Starting at Criffel lane end, the small car park under Waterloo Monument, gives 9.5km (6 miles) and same ascent – saving 45mins but missing some enjoyable, and fairly dry, valley paths. The walk could also start at the Ardwall car park (NX 970 634).

Standing alone on the Solway shore, Criffel has tremendous views north into the Southern Uplands, out to sea, and across to the English Lake District. And the sightline also works in reverse – Criffel is familiar to walkers on Skiddaw and Grasmoor, even though they may not all be able to name it.

The hill is a huge lump of granite, smeared with peat and heather. It's an atmospheric place, where warlord Douglas of Morton may (or more probably may not) lie buried under the summit cairn. The Norsemen named

it Kraku-fjall, 'the Crow (or Raven) Hill'; Iron Age locals built an island refuge on Loch Kindar in Criffel's shadow.

This is the start point for the slightly shortened version of the walk.

New path off Criffel, looking down to Loch Kindar and the Nith Estuary



Head into **New Abbey**, bearing left at the Abbey Arms to the overgrown mill pond. Here turn left, signed for Waterloo Monument. In 100 metres look for steps up left to a small path that shortcuts a bend in the lane. The enclosed path exits into a field; head up its left edge to rejoin the lane above.

Follow the lane for 800 metres, when it ends at a small car park. ◀ Bear left, signposted 'Criffel', over a track bridge.

The track continues alongside Glen Burn, passing to the right of **Mid Glen** house. Keep ahead on a path, which bends away from the stream and runs up under woodland to join a forest track. Keep ahead for 200m to meet a larger one.

Turn up this for 200 metres, rounding a bend to the left, then keep ahead on a waymarked path under the trees. It bends to the right, heading up with a wall on its left. At the 250m contour it leaves the plantation through a broken wall. The path continues straight uphill, rebuilt

at first then peaty, to the cairn on **Knockendoch**.

The path dips slightly through the col behind Knockendoch, then runs up the left (east) flank of the rounded, heathery ridge towards Criffel. It runs up through some grassed-over peat hags, which offer sheltered lunch-spots. Then it joins the wide, new path to the big cairn and trig point at **Criffel** summit.

Return down the well built path, which zigzags down the rough grassy slopes towards Loch Kindar and the Nith Estuary. The path slants left to reach the stream at a gate at the top of the plantations. From here it runs down to the right of Craigrockall Burn (ignore a footbridge on the left).

Trees in the stream strip are scrubby broadleaf, still allowing views ahead. The path crosses a forest track and descends to a second one low down on the hill, signposted to the left for New Abbey.

The track runs gently downhill. ▶ At a junction after 600 metres a waymark indicates the track ahead. In 500 metres, as the track bends left, another waymark points right for an overgrown green path. This descends through woodland above **Loch Kindar** to a kissing gate. Turn down right to a second gate into a loch-side field.



This ground was clear-felled in 2014 and replanted with birch, so has views ahead over Nithsdale

CRIFFEL BOULDERS

With no towering precipices in the Southern Uplands, rock climbers have to be ingenious. The rounded granite boulders of Criffel provide bouldering sport on Airdrie Hill, 3km south of the summit. They're best reached from the forest roads to the southwest. The other spot for mini-mountaineering hereabouts is the Thirlstane, a pierced sea-stack southwest of Criffel (NX 991 565).

Meanwhile, one enterprising boulder has made it all the way down into England. The Glacial Boulder on Cannock Chase, Staffordshire, has been recognised as originating on Criffel, and so provides a clue to glacier flows during the Ice Age.

Follow the loch side round to the field's corner. Turn left along the field edge, crossing a farm track (signpost on the right) and then a small ditch bridge. A kissing gate is on the right just before the field's far corner.

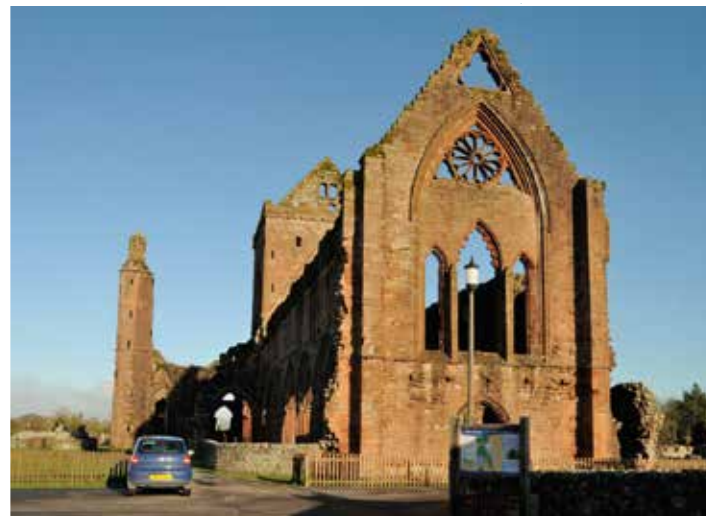
Cross a ditch and turn right beside it, to join another track, with a combination gate ahead (it opens either as wide farm gate or as small person gate).

Return to Waterloo Monument car park

Walkers who started at the Waterloo Monument car park on the shorter version of the walk now turn back left along this track. Just through another combination gate, bear right on a grassier track, with trees to the left. Ignore a gate ahead, but bend up left to another combination gate. Cross the long field ahead to a gate near the Waterloo Monument car park.

Go through the gate ahead on a track which crosses a stream and bends right. It runs between fields and through a couple more gates to the edge of **New Abbey**. The track bends right, emerging between ornamental gateposts.

Take the street ahead, bending left to reach the **A710** at a duck pond. Turn left for 100 metres, past the primary school, then cross into a signed footpath. It runs past a playing field and becomes narrow and enclosed. After a kissing gate, turn left alongside the old granite boundary wall of Sweetheart Abbey.



Sweetheart Abbey was built in 1273 by Lady Devorgilla of Galloway to commemorate her husband, John Balliol. His embalmed heart is buried within the abbey.

Sweetheart Abbey

Steps lead up left to a gate into the abbey graveyard. A gate alongside the abbey leads out into its **car park**.

ARTIFICIAL PATHS

Peat forms on top of the impermeable granite, and any soil underneath will be coarse sand made of quartz. So path erosion has been especially bad here, as on Arran, the Cairngorms and the Mountains of Mourne. To help preserve this handsome new path, you could

- avoid walking on the verges alongside the path
- don't walk around the culverts across the path, as this forms routes for water to flow back onto the path below
- avoid kicking stones into the culverts
- once or twice in a day, clear some stones out of a culvert
- don't short-cut the zigzags

THE BORDER ABBEYS

The wealthy and conspicuous Border abbeys were frequent targets for English raids. The campaign that destroyed them was carried out by Henry VIII's general the Earl of Hertford in the 1540s, aimed at persuading the Scots to marry their infant Queen Mary to England's Prince Edward (later King Edward VI).

The war was nicknamed the 'Rough Wooing' by its Scots victims, but was a campaign of destruction and terror that has been compared with the Nazi Blitzkrieg of 1940. Hertford boasted that he had burned down 192 'towns, towers, stedes, barmkyns, parish churches, and castell houses', while driving away into England 10,386 cattle, 12,429 sheep, 1296 horses and 200 goats.

Today a 70 mile (110km) footpath, the Borders Abbeys Way, links the four destroyed by Hertford – Melrose, Dryburgh, Kelso and Jedburgh.

WALK 32

Rubers Law

Start/Finish	Denholm village (NT 567 184)
Distance	12km (7½ miles)
Ascent	450m (1500ft)
Approx time	4hrs
Terrain	Paths, tracks, rough grassland onto Rubers Law
Max altitude	Rubers Law, 424m
Maps	Landranger 80 (Cheviot Hills); Explorer 331 (Teviotdale S)
Public transport	Bus 20 (Hawick–Kelso)
Parking	Denholm village green

*Dark Ruberslaw, that lifts his head sublime,
Rugged and hoary with the wrecks of time;
On his broad misty front the giant wears
The horrid furrows of ten thousand years.*

So wrote John Leyden of Denholm, born in 1775, general peasant prodigy and ballad gatherer for Walter Scott. Leyden was also an early hill-walker,

crossing 40 miles to get the last two verses of a ballad and returning at midnight, singing it in his loud, harsh voice.

Denholm is altogether charming, with its wide Georgian green. Denholm Dean is as nice as its name. Rubers Law itself is rocky on top, with a hill fort and a depth of history far exceeding its physical 424m. Here Alexander Peden was almost unique among hill-walkers in wanting mist to come down rather than up. 'Cast the lap of Thy cloak ower auld Sandy and thir poor things,' he prayed as redcoats ringed the hill where he was preaching Protestant fundamentalism some time in the 1680s. From a clear sky, cloud descended onto the hill. The redcoats got lost, and Peden and his congregation escaped among the whin bushes.

Leave the village green at its southern corner (where the main road enters from Hawick). Head south on Westgate at the war memorial, passing toilets and a walking signpost for Denholm Dean. After 200 metres look out for a signposted gate on the right. Steps lead down into **Denholm Dean** woods.

The path crosses the stream by a footbridge then heads upstream. Fork down left to cross another footbridge, up to a path T-junction. Turn right, soon crossing a third bridge. On the following rise, take the main

Denholm village



The widely spaced bounding fences suggest this is a former drove road.

path forking uphill to join a wide path along the top edge of the woods, with the stream down left. At the end of the wood the path continues as a grass track between fences. ◀ The track runs southwest to end at a lane.

Turn left, going uphill then down, then up to right of a plantation. At a lane junction, keep ahead for another 50 metres. As the lane bends left, take a track ahead down into a small wood. Cross a shallow ford to gates at the wood edge.

Take the left-hand gate, and go uphill to left of a hedge to a gate on the right. Continue uphill to right of the hedge, then bear right to go up to right of an incised stream to the field top. Through a gate, turn right along the field foot and up its right-hand side, beside a high deer fence.

At the field top, a wall gate is just across to the left. Through this, in rough grassland, slant up left, to a gate at the left-hand end of a fence. Head uphill to right of a fence to its top, into open, heathery ground.

Slant up left among rocky outcrops to find a path approaching **Rubers Law** summit from the north. The path passes a scrambly little cliff just before the white painted trig point.

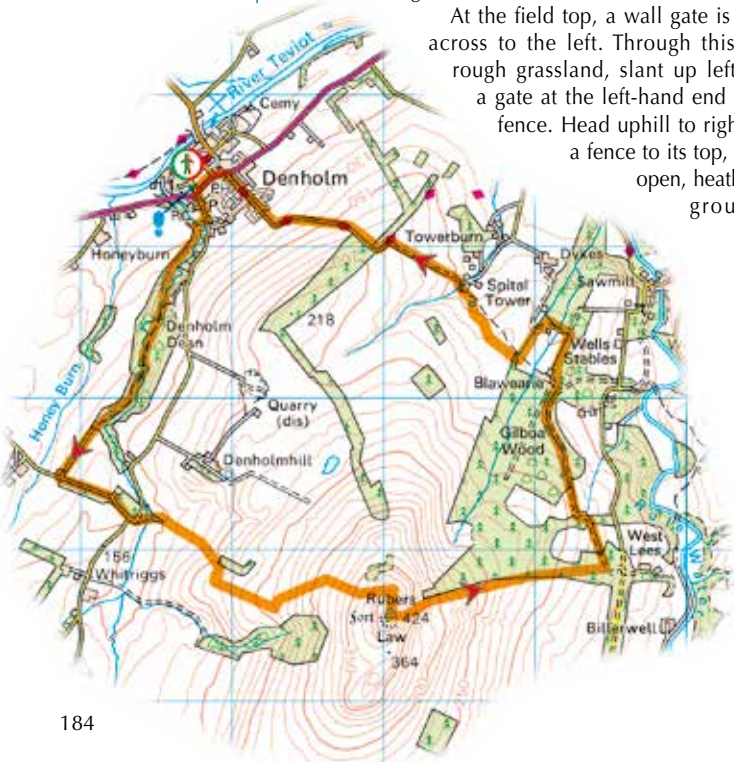
Descend steeply east to a small gate at a bottom corner of the wall below. A small path leads down to a clump of larches, at the top of a large plantation.

Head downhill to the right of the plantation's boundary wall, on a grassy path. In 100 metres it takes a small gate in the wall, with a waymark post, and heads downhill just inside the plantation. The path joins a downhill track, to reach a T-junction. (Here the Rule valley road is just down to the right around the track bend).

Turn left, gently uphill. The track passes across an open field, turns uphill in a woodland strip, then crosses a second field. It runs gently downhill in attractive **Gilboa Wood** to a junction below **Blawearie** houses.

Turn up towards the houses, but just before them, take a track on the right into woods. Keep up left along the top edge of the open woodland until a stile on the left leads into a field corner. This has a Borders Abbays Way marker, and the route follows these waymarks back to Denholm. ▶

Note that the Borders Abbays Way here does not follow the line marked on older maps.



On Rubers Law, looking east towards The Cheviot



Minto Law, Minto Craigs and Fatlips Castle from track above Denholm

Cross the stile and bend to the right around the plantation edge. Look out for a waymark pointing left soon before the field corner. Cross the open field southwest, keeping ahead with the field edge wall on your right. With a wood corner just ahead, turn right across a stile and gate with a tall waymark post. Head across the open field northwest to pass a waymark post and head down beyond it to a gate with stile. Bear down slightly right to join the corner of a gravel track.

It leads down to **Spital Tower** (no tower, just a farm); here turn left over an old bridge onto an uphill track. At its top, turn up left, signposted for Denholm. In 100 metres turn right into the wood, on a rutted track down to the top of a stony surfaced path. This runs downhill between hedges.

Across the Teviot valley, on top of the wooded Minto Craigs, you could spot the ruined tower of **Fatlips Castle**. Fatlips himself was the head of a small but vicious Border clan, the Turnbells of Bedrule.

The path turns right to descend into **Denholm**. At the main A698, turn left to the village green.



LOTHIAN

Sunrise over Dunbar, from the coast near North Berwick Law (Walk 38)