

2024 Big Green Hike in aid of Wader Quest

Written by Rick Simpson
Photographs Elis Simpson



As we set off from home, the feeders were busy with several Siskins, loads of Chaffinches, a couple of Collared Doves mopping up the detritus dropped by the finches and three species of tit; Blue, Great and Coal. They seemed to be feeding voraciously, it had rained heavily overnight and had only stopped about an hour before our departure. There was also a wind blowing, a strong wind. It was strong in town; heaven knows what awaited us on the clifftops.

We had arranged our walk to take in some of the best and varied delights that Loftus has to offer. We planned to see present day industry, past industry, an historic burial site, pass along a national path, enjoy the environmental delights of a nature reserve and be surrounded by magnificent scenery and all within a few miles of home. We also set ourselves the challenge of surmounting the highest point along this stretch of coast, indeed any stretch on the east coast of England.

The climb out of Loftus was slow, we wanted to pace ourselves, birds were not much in evidence due to the wind, but we did see a Pheasant scurry across the road. Soon though, we reached the first planned point of interest, a row of houses called North Terrace in Hummersea Lane, which appears, to all intents and purposes, to have been unceremoniously dumped along a ridge for no reason. They had however, originally been built as accommodation for miners in the local iron mines. Unusually though these were not owned by the mines and rented to the miners but were privately owned by the occupiers.

The view from the road near the cottages looks across the valley and down on a small town called Skinningrove. Here fishing and iron mining used to be the mainstay for the small population, all now commemorated in a museum called Land of Iron. Atop the hill opposite the houses lies, what could, to some people, be a huge eyesore, but what is to others a lifeline of employment, the British Steel works at Carlin How.

We had hoped that being an early spring day we might bump into some early summer visiting birds, but the aforementioned wind was, as we walked on, firmly at our backs and blowing out to sea, not the sort of weather to bring a fall of tired migrants to the clifftop fields and hedges. As a result, a couple of Dunnocks, a House Sparrow or two near the houses and a couple of Blackbirds were all we encountered.



The view from Hummersea Lane. The white buildings are the British Steel works, Skinningrove is mostly hidden in the valley between.



An overview of Hummersea nature reserve with the shoreline far below.

At the end of the road, it descends and bears sharply right going downhill steeply. In the inner angle of this L shape lies Hummersea Farm. This was built to house the Manager of the Alum mines that we will see later in the walk. Near the bottom of the slope is a footpath that cuts across towards the cliff. We took it. Emerging from the other side with just Greenfinch added to our day list of birds, we were on the edge of a nature reserve called Hummersea, which is managed by the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust. The reserve's most sought-after residents are plants such as the Fragrant and Pyramidal Orchids which appear later in the year. It is a glorious clifftop habitat and here, we dared to hope for some migrants, but alas it was not to be, with the possible exception of a lone Chiff Chaff bashing out its song from the gorse. We have been hearing Chiff Chaffs now for a week or so, almost certainly this was not an overnight arrival. Here we

added Linnet and Goldfinch, while Meadow Pipits were here with their insipid call, plenty of them, and they were to keep us company all along the clifftop accompanied by the tumbling song of the ubiquitous Skylarks. Also first noted here were Woodpigeons, Magpies, Carrion Crows, and Herring Gulls battling the wind in flight. The most striking find here though was a gleaming Yellowhammer glowing in the morning sun that had blessed our visit. No longer a common hedgerow bird, it is always a pleasure to come across one and hear that once familiar song.



Yellowhammer.

Here we got our first chance to look down on the beach below us, the tide was low, and we were able to spot the striking Oystercatchers even from our lofty height. Also noted was a Cormorant sitting on an exposed rock and suddenly, out of the blue, came a flock of birds whizzing past us, so close we could hear the feathers scything through the air. Initial excitement was followed by a little disappointment, they were Feral Pigeons. I say they were feral as they could conceivably be a

population of these birds that had gone back to their roots and, like their Rock Dove ancestors, were living a life of freedom on the cliffs. However, they could equally have been from a pigeon loft, pigeon racing is a pastime that Skinningrove is also famous for, they could have been out for their morning exercise. Maybe these particular birds had been racers but had decided to remain at large and banded together like a bunch of renegades, determined to rub our human noses in it by their display of aerial dexterity, thumbing their beaks at their former gaolers... catch me if you can. These birds seemed to follow us along the clifftop as we went, zooming low and fast past us at regular intervals as if taunting us, or maybe they were just thinking we may have a bag of seed in our rucksacks, who knows?

We were now walking along one of the UK's National Trails, the Cleveland Way. This trail is 109 miles long and starts the other side of the North York Moors at Helmsley. It skirts the moors passing through the Cleveland Hills and arrives at the coast at Saltburn-by-the-Sea from where it then follows the coastline all the way down to Filey.

The trail, heading east here, rises steeply and unfortunately that was the direction that we were now to go. At first the trail was easy enough along a track suitable for vehicles until it reaches a house. Here we encountered our first Swallow of the spring. Famously Aristotle is quoted to have said "One swallow does not make a summer, neither does one fine day; similarly, one day or brief time of happiness does not make a person entirely happy." But I can tell you, that in that moment, that swallow made us very happy, buoying our spirits, which was just as well. We paused for a quick drink and a protein bar and before setting off again noted a lone Starling fly across the field before us, heard a Robin singing and witnessed a Sparrowhawk zoom across the fields, clipping hedges and stone walls as it went hoping to surprise some poor bird to become its breakfast. From here the vehicle track was left behind and we had to trudge uphill along a muddy path. It has rained a lot this winter and the overnight downpour only added to the saturation of the surface. Parts of the trail were a veritable quagmire requiring one to be deft of foot and forever looking downwards, not a happy situation for those of us looking for birds. The alternative was to slip and fall, and at this early stage of the walk that would have been less than optimal. Our steady plod, picking our foot placing carefully, meant we were overtaken by more adept, hardened walkers, one or two though showed signs of having tumbled at least once, with muddy clothing not restricted to below the knee. They were however all cheerful and pleasant to pass the time of day with, as we heartily bade each other a good morning.



The Cleveland Way from the top of the steep climb showing the steel works at Carlin How, Hummersea Farm and nature reserve and the distant Hunt Cliff beyond Cattersty Sands and the jetty at Skinningrove.

The clamber up the slope avoiding the more squelchy parts of the path led us to what is known as the Moss Seat. It is not obvious me why it is so named and nor could I find any information about it, but there is a huge hollowed-out part of the cliff that looks kind of mossy that could, with imagination, look like a seat for a giant.

These cliffs hold a good reserve of fossil specimens, we often find them when walking on the beach at Skinningrove. They were first noted and described by a young geologist by the name of Lewis Hunton who wrote a paper on the subject, only to die young two years later. At the clifftop there is a plaque commemorating his work of bringing the fossils to the attention of the scientists.



Plaque to Lewis Hunton's work.

This research was important because it was a technique developed that indicated, by the presence of fossils, suitable shale for alum extraction and it was here where the cliff tops level out a tad and we encountered our next point of interest; the Loftus Alum quarries. These mines were established in the 1656 and continued to be worked until the 1863 and devastated the cliffs leaving them a shadow of their former glory.

Walking along the cliff was difficult now, not because of the soggy soil underfoot, but because of the howling gale that was careering up the slope behind the cliff towards us and threatened to lift us off our feet and dump us over the cliff edge. Indeed that fate befell Elis' hat and we had no way to retrieve it, at least that was safe. A Pied Wagtail suddenly flew up from the cliff face and reaching the strong wind in clear air above it was knocked back a few feet before it regained its equilibrium and somehow managed to battle across the pat to the field beyond. Here we had some

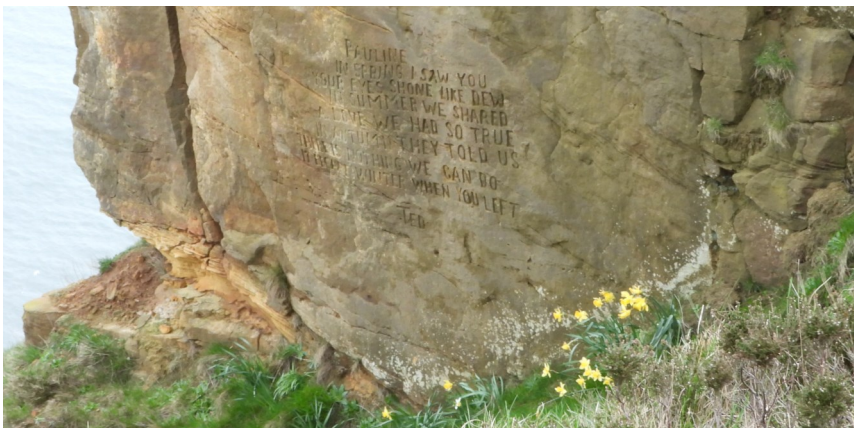


National Trust sign for Loftus Alum Quarries

excellent views of an aerial master at work, the Fulmar. There were birds in pairs dotted along the cliff, but the air movement meant that the Fulmars could soar just over the lip of the cliff, passing back and forth with consummate ease, while we had trouble standing. We also came across some cliff dwelling Jackdaws here we came to another Alum mine, this one separated from the Loftus mines by a short section of unsullied cliffs and is called the Boulby Alum mines. The information plaque is sadly unreadable. However, we were to have a surprise. Another point of interest that I had not previously known about, nor planned as part of our itinerary and that was something that was very readable. A love poem carved in the cliff face by a chap called Ted to a lady called Pauline. Ted risked life and limb to produce this memorial to his beloved wife.



The unreadable plaque: note the flock of pigeons in the background planning another assault.



Ted's poetic and heroic memorial to Pauline.

He is quoted as saying "I saw names on benches and things like that, but I wanted to do something different in her memory and I couldn't build her the Taj Mahal." So, in 2015 he commenced work and it is still very clear now, the poem reads;

"In spring I saw you
Your eyes shone like dew
In summer we shared
A love we had so true
In autumn they told us
There is nothing we can do
It became winter when you left."

Moving, and so were we, to the furthest point of our walk where we encountered a geological point of interest on our route. We were now standing atop the highest cliff on the east coast of England. I used to tell everyone it was the highest in England, but discovered there was one superior in height in Devon. Boulby Cliff stands at a magnificent and awe-inspiring 700 feet (213 metres). The Ordnance Survey people placed a Triangulation Point, often shortened to Trig point, on the highest point in the field behind the cliff. Despite her diminutive stature, here Elis stood head and shoulders above all other inhabitants of Loftus.



Elis at the Trig Point, notice the lack of hat! - Rick Simpson

Now we left the Cleveland Way to find its way steeply down the Boulby Bank and across to Staithes, a previously thriving fishing village and where James Cook, who became the famous Captain Cook, first fell in love with the sea as an apprentice in a grocer and chandler shop, before moving to Whitby to start his career as a sailor. We took the footpath past the Trig Point and down to the road where a telegraph tower stands. That path was decidedly oozy and despite all my best efforts it was here that I got the inevitable 'booty' when my foot slipped off the tussock I was treading on into the gooey ooze up to my ankle! Unpleasant though this was, it was not the disaster it could have been and in any case, we had no option but to trudge onwards.

Joining the road made for easier walking, the hedgerows protected us a little from the wind where they were left standing. We passed a group of houses where there were some bird feeders and here, among the House Sparrows we found several Tree Sparrows, always a treat. A Wren serenaded us from somewhere in the garden bushes. We continued down the road to another small row of cottages at Upton Farm. At this point, the previous day, while on a reconnoitring mission we watched a Barn Owl hunting and catching a small rodent. There was no sign of the owl today though sadly, nor the Lapwings we had also seen displaying the day before.



Tree Sparrow

Once more we left the road at this point and headed back towards the cliffs. The purpose of this little detour was to pay respects to one who is probably Loftus' most famous resident, albeit from Anglo Saxon days. As you enter Loftus by road, the welcoming sign refers to the village being 'Home of The Saxon Princess'.

Between 2005 and 2007 this site was excavated, and many 7th century graves were discovered and at their centre the grave of a woman who became known as 'The Anglo Saxon Princess'. Whether or not she was a princess is unknown, but it is certain that she was a lady of importance as she was given what is called a bed burial, where she was laid to rest on a structure like a bed and three very fine gold pendants were found with her showing that she was of high status.

We made our way back up to the Cleveland Way then back down towards the road, and there we the route back down into Loftus and then home where our day was completed by a male Bullfinch in our garden as we recuperated with a much deserved (in our view) cup of tea.



Information pertaining to the Saxon Princess burial site and the artifacts found there.



Panoramic view looking north-west from the clifftop.

The result of all this effort was that we earned £170 in donations for Wader Quest. At the same time the Chair of the Executive Committee, Elizabeth Anderson, did a walk in Kent and raised a further £40, bringing our combined total to a respectable and useful £210 so a big thank you to all those who supported us and made donations. To be honest, we never thought about doing anything of this kind before to raise money for Wader Quest and it was Elizabeth who found the event and introduced us to it. So we offer her our thanks, not just for helping us to raise money, but also for inspiring us to undertake this challenge and the realisation of how enjoyable a bracing walk can be. At the same time, we witnessed wonderful views and discovered much about the interesting history and culture of our chosen new home as well as outstanding beauty we live in.



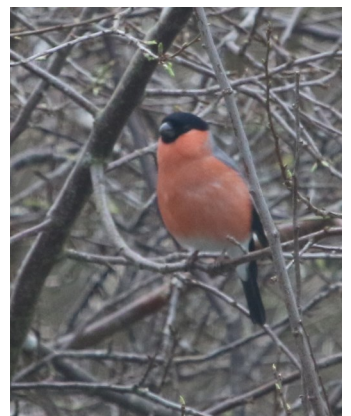
Fulmars on the cliffs.



Glorious gorse at Hummersea



Greater Stitchwort in the hedgerow



Bullfinch in the garden