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Fontburn Reservoir Walk

Starting point and OS Grid reference	Fontburn Reservoir – Car park on north side of reservoir (NZ 047939)
Ordnance Survey map	OL 42 – Keilder Water Bellingham and Simonside Hills
Distance	6.2 miles
Traffic light rating	

Introduction: The Fontburn Reservoir walk is a mixture of pretty waterside walking and wide open spaces. The going is straightforward but can be muddy in places during/after wet weather. There are attractive views for most of the walk not least towards the Simonside Hills. There is a chance of seeing some interesting birdlife including pied flycatcher, redstart and lapwing. I was fortunate to see a vole.

Fontburn Reservoir is in the valley of the River Font and was completed in 1908 to provide water for the Morpeth and Bedlington areas. It also provides a pleasant trout fishing opportunity (licences available at the shop). This walk starts from the free car park by the reservoir and makes use of the waymarked footpath by its southern shore, created by Northumbrian Water.

You will see the term “Bastle” on the OS map. Bastles were fortified farmhouses built in the late 16th and early 17th centuries to protect local people from raiders. This walk passes two such sites but to be honest, they were something of a disappointment and have largely been “redeployed” into the existing farmhouses. According to the Northumbrian Water information board at Fontburn Reservoir, there is a cup and ring marked rock en route. I identified a rock which had what might have been “cups” on its top (though saw no rings) but whether these were man made or natural erosion, I leave to you!

There were a couple of “interesting” stream crossings which I go into in more detail below.

To get to Fontburn Reservoir, turn west off the B6342 at a sharp bend, about 6¼ miles south of Rothbury. It is signposted by a brown tourist sign from the road “Fontburn 2 miles”. There are two car parks and I started this walk from the one reached by turning right over the reservoir dam then left.

Start: Cross the dam and turn right along the southern shore of the reservoir. When you are well along it, the path diverts away from the water to avoid a nature reserve. The diversion is clearly signposted.

You pass a large rock which may or may not be a cup and ring rock, the path bends to the right, then left towards a marker post on the horizon (NZ 031935).

From the marker post turn right and follow the path along the bank top as it curves rounds to the left. It crosses a ladder stile which you will see ahead.

Once over the stile, the path bends left to another marker post and is an obvious track. The next turn is a little difficult to spot (NZ 023936). You will see Fallowlees Farm over to the right which is your destination and you need to look out for a marker post over to the right marking a different route to the yellow topped posts you are following. Turn right here. The track to the farm is obvious. It swings left then over a footbridge across a pretty stream. Once over this, go up the hill to the right.

At the farm (NZ 019943), turn right to walk in front of the farmhouse. Here is the first "Bastle" marked and next to the farm you can just spot some large stones comprising the remnants of the corner of a wall which look to be all that remains.

The exit from the farm is in the right hand corner after passing the barns. As you then enter a large field, the route is via a gate about half way along the opposite wall.

You enter a plantation area where the trees are in various stages from recently felled to more mature. The path is reasonably easy to follow. Cross a stony track where a footpath marker at the other side confirms the route.

After negotiating the plantation, you arrive at a stream, which the path crosses and there is no bridge. However, when I did this walk, the stream was in serious spate and I had to go upstream (left) for a couple of hundred yards, to find a feasible crossing. The rocks are very slippery so take care if you have to do this.

It was then necessary to re-cross the stream. It is clear where the bridge had been but no more. To the right was a rough, ford, spot and I paddled quickly across relying on my gaiters to keep me dry. Again, take care on slippery rocks under the water.

The next crossing mercifully had a functioning footbridge. Cross here and turn right. Look out for the bridleway up to the farm (Newbiggin Farm) on the left after about 200 yards (NZ 035940). Turn right at the farm.

Follow the farm drive, ignoring the path on the left signposted for Blueburn Farm. After crossing a cattle grid turn left where indicated by a fingerpost for "B6342" and "Coldrife 2 miles" (NZ 040942). Alternatively, if you want to shorten the walk, you can follow this tarmac drive back to the reservoir.

Assuming you continue to follow my walk, head for the centre of the two power poles ahead. After the poles, the evidence of a walked route is a little clearer but if in doubt head towards the fence corner ahead.

Keep to the left at the corner and follow the fenceline. Ignore the path off to the right just past a group of rocks. The fence turns sharp right. Cross the stile at the next corner (NZ 049947) and follow the left hand field boundary. You come to a walkers' gate on the left (NZ 049946). Go through this and follow the path up to Ritton White

Farm. Here is the site of the second Bastle. There looks to be clear evidence of older components of the farm but again, positive identification of anything in particular was determined. There are good views however back towards Fontburn Reservoir.

Follow the bridleway alongside the west of the farm then after going through a gate, look out for a stile on the right (NZ 055944). Over this, walk downhill heading for the base of the roundish hill ahead at its centre.

Turn left to follow the old railway track (NZ 051943) and you soon come to a five bar gate on the right. Go through this and turn left. At the children's' play area, turn right past the water treatment centre and the houses, back to the car park – turn right at the dam. This last section is not designated as public footpaths or Access Land but the old railway line looks well walked.

