

HUMAN HISTORY OF NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK

Northumberland National Park contains thousands of archaeological sites that span the ages between the stone age and modern times. There are many areas of the Park that still hold visible remains of settlements, field systems and ritual monuments. These still exist because the area which is now the National Park has not seen intensive use of land in recent times. The “natural landscape” of the Park was once all wooded. What we see today has been created by mankind over the past few thousand years. Archaeological conservation within the Park is not concerned only with the preservation of individual monuments, but with the conservation and management of the entire historic landscape.

Northumberland has often been an area of conflict from the Roman frontier of Hadrian’s Wall to the Saxon, Viking and Norman invasions, followed by the English - Scottish border troubles to the current military training area of Otterburn. These have also played their part in the population levels, the people’s lifestyle and the remains left behind. The majority of old structures that do remain were built to be defensible. These were only affordable by the wealthier elements in society. The more common folk would have lived in houses that were easy to replace. The turbulent times in which they lived may have resulted in attacks that destroyed their homes.

Prehistoric (approx. up to 100AD)

Within the National Park, there are many monuments that have been dated to prehistoric times. There are cup and ring marked rocks which were carved in the stone age (c.4000 years ago), cairns, stone circles and burials from the Bronze Age (c.3000 years ago) and hillforts and field systems from the Iron Age and Romano-British (native people at the time of the Roman occupation) times. The Cheviot Hills show a fine prehistoric landscape, with many hillforts accessible from Rights of Way or through access agreements. To the south of Rothbury there is Lordenshaws hillfort, which also has examples of cup and ring marked rocks, burials and cairns nearby.

Roman

The best known archaeological remains within the Park are those of Hadrian’s Wall. They have been subject to comprehensive research, excavation and conservation. In recognition of its international cultural significance, it was inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 1987. English Heritage and the National Trust own parts of the Wall and much of the land surrounding it. There are also a large number of associated remains, such as forts and civilian settlements in the locality. It is the most popular visitor attraction within the Park, attracting the majority of the Park’s 1.4 million annual visitors. As a consequence the management of the Wall area is particularly complex, with many interests needing to be balanced.

Leading north from the Wall is Dere Street, with several forts and camps spaced along its length. The most visible of these is at High Rochester, near the modern A68, where there is negotiated access to the fort which is now located at the edge of the Otterburn Training Area.

Anglo-Saxon period

There is little remaining from this period. Many settlements in the landscape may have originated at this time. Part of the Saxon township of Ad Gefrin lies within the Park boundary near Wooler.

Mediaeval and Middle Ages

During the intermittent Anglo-Scottish border wars of this time, there were many imposing castles and towers built across the whole region. There are earthworks remaining from the timber Norman motte and bailey Castle at Elsdon. Within the National Park, there are 12th to 14th Century castles, with fine remains at Harbottle, Dally, Tarsset and Thirlwall (which was built of stone entirely robbed from Hadrian’s Wall). From the 14th and 15th Centuries, there are pele towers, some of which are still inhabited in a modernised form. There are easily seen examples of these at Elsdon, Biddlestone and Tosson.

The Reivers

Both before and after the Union of the English and Scottish crowns in 1603, cross-border and local raids by the Border Reivers were common enough for the people to build defensible farmhouses (bastles). These are unique to the Borders and 40 have been identified within the Park. However, more may have been incorporated into later buildings as the area became more settled. There are many in ruins scattered across the Park, but more complete examples can be seen at Snabdough, Akeld, Gatehouse and Woodhouses.

Seventeenth Century onwards

From this time more peaceful conditions have allowed the development of non-defensible buildings to serve the needs of an expanding farming community. The resulting farmsteads and cottages, coupled with a few grand country houses such as Hesleyside, provide a rich and diverse architectural heritage. This is perhaps surprising in such a sparsely populated area.

Survey and Research

The area around Hadrian's Wall is the most comprehensively surveyed within the Park. Much of it is in the ownership of English Heritage and charities such as the National Trust and the Vindolanda Trust. For other time periods, investigations have been more sparse. Studies have been undertaken on the historic buildings within the National Park. National Park archaeological staff are working with students from both Durham and Newcastle Universities and members of Northumberland Archaeology Group to undertake new fieldwork projects. Currently, the Discovering Our Hillfort Heritage Project and the Historic Village Atlas Project are underway, teaching us much about prehistoric and medieval landscapes.

Conservation

The National Park Authority staff work closely with other agencies and land owners to ensure the conservation of archaeological sites. To prevent any damage from new constructions, all planning applications are viewed by the National Park archaeologist. The Forestry Commission consults the Park to avoid grant aiding any planting schemes where there is a danger to archaeological remains. Forest Enterprise is working to open up access to any archaeological sites currently enclosed within their plantations.

The majority of sites and buildings are not protected by law. National Park staff negotiate their conservation through agreements with the landowners. Where there is danger of destruction or damage and there is no other option, the National Park Authority or English Heritage can take the site into guardianship.

The National Park Authority takes a leading role in the restoration, conservation and interpretation of a range of important sites, buildings and monuments. Wherever possible, building or archaeological conservation is designed to benefit landscape and ecological conservation. However, on important sites, the protection of the remains takes priority.

Historic sites

As Northumberland National Park is so sparsely populated, it still hosts plentiful remains of human activities from earlier ages. There are examples from all time periods, dating back to the Neolithic (stone age). Some of the better known, and easily accessible are listed below:

Hadrian's Wall World Heritage Site: 46 kms of the best preserved section of Hadrian's Wall lie within the National Park. Alongside the Wall runs a public footpath which is joined by the Pennine Way for part of its length. The Hadrian's Wall National Trail, and Pennine Bridleway are currently being developed. Some sites are owned by private organizations who may charge visitors to their sites. The following are free:

Walltown GR NY 675663 and **Cawfields** GR NY 713665 reclaimed quarries, now recreation sites owned by the National Park. Footpath access to the Wall. Tel: 01434 605555

Once Brewed National Park Centre GR NY 753668 information and orientation centre for the World Heritage Site. Tel: 01434 344396

There are other Roman sites, museums and impressive sections of Wall, some of which are open to the public at all times. These are signed from the B6318, details can be obtained from Once Brewed Centre.

Bastles and Castles: Unique to the border region are the mediaeval fortified farmhouses known as Bastles. These were the strongholds of the infamous Border Reivers who spent the lawless times before the Union of the English and Scottish crowns raiding sheep, cattle and horses from neighbouring valleys. The following Bastles are on private land, but access agreements have been negotiated with the land owners.

Woodhouses Bastle well preserved and restored, 1½ miles south of Holystone GR NT 966003

Black Middens Bastle GR NY 773899 along **Tarset Burn**, a tributary of the River North Tyne which has a way-marked trail around the remains of several Bastles in its valley.

Tosson Tower GR NU 029006 and **Elsdon Tower** GR NY 936933 are Peel Towers

Harbottle Castle GR NT 933048 on the north edge of the village

Prehistoric Sites: Because the Northumberland landscape has been farmed in the same low input fashion for centuries, the moorlands have not changed significantly since they were first cleared of trees roughly 4000 years ago. There has been little ploughing and so many archaeological remains are still intact.

Lordenshaws GR NZ 055993 Hill fort and cup and Ring marked rocks

Breamish Valley GR NU 010160 and westwards. Hill forts and settlements