How to reach Thirlwall Castle:
Please use an Ordnance Survey map: OS Explorer OL 43 Hadrian’s Wall

Nearest National Park Centre:
National Park Centre, Once Brewed T: +44 (0)1434 344396

For public transport information contact:

Life in Northumberland between 1300 and 1600 was dangerous and unstable. Cross-border raids between England and Scotland were common. Peace and stability was replaced by violence and intimidation, robbery and ransom. As fear and uncertainty gripped the area, important families protected themselves against attack by building strong defensible homes, like the one at THIRLWALL.
Walks to Thirlwall Castle  OS Grid ref. NY 659 662. Please use an Ordnance Survey map

Here is a choice of three easy-to-follow walks to Thirlwall Castle:

From Greenhead, a 0.4 mile/0.7km easy walk to Thirlwall Castle

1. Park in Greenhead.
2. From the telephone box walk along Station Road to the gate at the end.
3. Take the footpath to the right of this gate waymarked for Pennine Way and Thirlwall Castle.
4. At the path end go through the wicket gate and turn right.
5. Cross the footbridge and follow the Tipalt Burn upstream to Thirlwall Castle.
6. To return in a circular loop, walk down the track from Thirlwall Castle (following the Pennine Way) and cross the footbridge over the Tipalt Burn beside Holmhead.
7. Head up the hill to the first bend in this woodland track.
8. Turn right over a stone step stile and follow the wall on your left to the next stile.
9. Cross here and make your way across the rough pastureland to the rocky mound ahead.
10. Go through three gates, cross the cobbled yard between the houses to come out onto the B6318. Turn right here and walk back to Greenhead.

From Walltown, a 0.6 mile/1km moderate walk to Thirlwall Castle

1. Park at the National Park car park at Walltown.
2. Turn right out of the car park entrance and walk about 50m down this road.
3. Turn left just before the cattle grid to cross a stile marked with an acorn sign (the Pennine Way).
4. Walk along this ridge for about 200m (ignore the offshoot paths going to the right and left).
5. Now descend downhill via two stiles to a woodland track that passes by Holmhead.
6. Cross the Tipalt Burn footbridge and go up the track to Thirlwall Castle. Return by the same route.

From Thirlwall, a 0.2 mile/0.3km easy walk to Thirlwall Castle

1. Park in Thirlwall Castle car park, halfway between Greenhead and Longbyre along the B6318.
2. Walk along the path (Pennine Way) in front of the nearby row of houses known as Thirlwall View.
3. Cross the railway line with care and walk over the footbridge. Follow the Tipalt Burn upstream to Thirlwall Castle. Return by the same route.

Please observe the Site Safety and Country Codes

Walks are along tracks and fields which can be muddy after rain.

Come prepared with waterproof clothing and sturdy footwear.

Please keep dogs under close control (preferably on a lead).
A Sense of Security

The Thirlwalls were local gentry folk who had acquired considerable wealth in royal military campaigns overseas, particularly France. They were not alone, however. Other local families were also competing for land, status and influence.

Within this local power struggle, one thing became vital – **Security** – for you and your family, your land and possessions. Soldiers who had fought for ‘King and Country’ now had to defend ‘Hearth and Home’.

One such man was John Thirlwall, a far-sighted and prudent man, who, in the 1330s built an impressive stronghold that would provide protection for the Thirlwall family for more than 300 years.

Neighbourhood Watch

Neighbouring families were building similar strongholds as symbols of social status and political power in an increasingly lawless and unstable environment. Rivalry amongst families was inevitable and local allegiances and loyalties often proved fickle. Yet at times, local differences had to be put aside to face more serious threats. These family strongholds would become crucial elements in the defence of the English border against Scottish attacks – effectively forming a chain of watchtowers stretching from coast to coast, guarding private estates but also helping to defend national sovereignty.

Legends & Spells

In such troubled, turbulent times, stories of ‘deeds of darkness’ and local legends spread like ‘wildfire’. One such legend tells of how, during a particularly violent raid, the family’s most prized possession, a jewel-encrusted gold table, was hidden by a servant down a deep well where he and the table remain to this day, protected by a magic spell!
The site chosen by John Thirlwall – a sheltered wooded bank of the Tipalt Burn, was not naturally defensive... but it was surrounded by hill-top positions that could warn of impending raids.

All the materials he needed lay close by – timber, water, lime and most important of all, thousands of neatly-dressed sandstone blocks which Hadrian and his army had quarried to build the Roman Wall more than 1000 years earlier.

‘Waste not – want not’ became the order of the day.

He built it fast... but to last. He built it so he could look out but no-one could look in. He built it to impress his guests... but imprison unwanted visitors. He built a home, a fortress and what would later be called... a CASTLE... a first-class job using second-hand stones!

Wall to Wall

© Mike Ritchie based on a drawing by P. Ryder
Artists’ Impressions

In the 18th century, the crumbling ruins of Thirlwall Castle began to attract artists and historians who were intrigued by its links with Hadrian’s Wall and its melancholy, romantic appearance. Over the next two centuries, many would come to paint and sketch the castle and the humble cottages that had sprung up within the shadow of its towering walls.

What’s in a Name?

THIRL-WALL is an Old English place-name meaning ‘Gap in the Wall’. It probably refers to a break in Hadrian’s Wall where the ridge on which the wall is located is crossed by a river or burn. The family adopted the name when they acquired the landholdings of the ‘Township’ of Thirlwall. It is no longer a common local surname although the Parish of Thirlwall still exists.

All My Worldly Goods

Several generations of Thirlwalls survived the border raids and prospered; for example, when Lancelot Thirlwall died in 1582, he left a comfortable endowment to his wife and each of his eight children. His will lists many domestic items and farm livestock:

- fetherbedes 13s 4d
- pillowes 2s 6d
- brasse pottes 12s
- candlesticks 3s 4d
- table napkins 2s 8d
- a bull 13s 4d
- oxen 33s 4d
- hyves of bees 8s
- hay 20s
- corne sowne of the ground 50s

After the Union of the Scottish and English Crowns in 1603, more peaceful conditions gradually developed and border strongholds became redundant. By the 1660s, the Thirlwalls had moved to Hexham where the land was more fertile and the climate a little gentler. The Thirlwall Castle Estate was sold in 1748 for £4000 to the Earl of Carlisle who, being interested only in the land, allowed the Castle to fall into gradual decay. Bats, swifts and other wildlife soon made their homes within its walls.