

# AREA HISTORY

Visit the Sites of the Ancient Britons, the Roman Hadrian's Wall, the disputed lands of the Border Reivers and industrialist William, Lord Armstrong's Cragside House in this Historic Part of Northumberland.



## ANCIENT BRITAIN



Above Rothbury to the North lie the remains of an ancient Iron Age hill fort, while 2 miles away at Lordenshaws is another fine example, and nearby are unusual cup & ring rock carvings - the Northumberland National Park has supplied an interpretation panel at this site. Local people have always considered Simonside peak to be a special place - some say a sacred mountain. Rock carvings can be found near ancient pathways, and the area has a number of barrows and caves, said to be filled with spirits.

Nobody knows who carved these symbols. Possibly they were done by "Picts", speaking a language which is now lost forever (related to Basque?). Much later, the Celts arrived, pushing the earlier inhabitants away to the north and west. Our local tribe was the "Votadini", stretching from the Tyne all the way to Edinburgh and beyond (and speaking Welsh! Gaelic didn't start until much further north!).

It was these Celts who constructed the many spectacular Hill Forts which sprout from so many hill tops in this area. Though it usually involves some stiff walking to reach them, you should try to visit a few. Their ramparts are often amazingly well preserved and the views from their lofty peaks are well worth the climb! Opinions differ as to their original purpose but, as cattle raiding always seems to have been a popular pastime hereabouts, they would have been useful way of deterring prehistoric "rustlers" (and wild beasts!).

More information on ancient Briton sites can be found by visiting the National Park Centres at Rothbury or Ingram (signposted from the A697 north of Powburn). For unspoilt scenery and beautiful open countryside the area around Rothbury is unsurpassed.

## HADRIAN'S WALL



During the 2nd century AD Emperor Hadrian oversaw the building of the great wall along the Tyne valley (73 miles coast to coast), close to Rothbury. Remains of a Roman Fort can still be seen at Chew Green in the Coquet Valley, 16 miles west of Rothbury. The fort was a staging post on a route known as Dere Street which in Roman times was the main road from York to Scotland.

Although initially defeated by the Romans, the local tribes were never totally subdued and "civilised" and may well have given them trouble from time to time. Ultimately, following a great invasion by various barbarian tribes about 367 AD, the Romans paid the Votadini themselves to defend the northern frontier from the Pictish tribes beyond. They seem to have done a good job - judging from place-names, the invaders only ever seem to have managed to penetrate a few miles south of the Forth, in the neighbourhood of Dalkeith

The National Parks have placed an interpretation panel at Chew Green to give visitors more information about this period of the Roman occupation during which the hill forts around Rothbury were still likely to have been inhabited.

## ANGLO SAXONS AND NORMANS

During the 5th Century the Anglo Saxons came to the area. They initially tended to settle the rich, more fertile plains, whilst the Britons used the hills as a last refuge.

The Angles and Saxons appear to have invaded the English South and Midlands about 440-450 AD. Here, however, it took another 100 years for King Ida to invade Northumberland (or Bernicia, as it was then called) in 547 AD. He seems to have had a hard time, as the first thing he had to do was to fortify Bamburgh (then known in Welsh as Dinguoary). This is the only time it's recorded that the Anglo-Saxons had to thus protect themselves, on landing.

Probably, the hardy hill tribes he met, plus the difficult nature of the country, slowed down the invasion a great deal. It was nearly 50 years before the Angles could claim to have completed the job; even then, the Celts in the hills were more likely to have been absorbed into the new Kingdom, rather than fleeing before the invaders!

The precise date of Rothbury's foundation is unknown but was probably some time after 600AD. The derivation of the name is disputed, some claiming it to be called after an Anglo-Saxon (or Danish - the name could apply to either) warlord, meaning "Hrotha's Town", others suggesting that it comes either from a Celtic word meaning a clearing, or from an early English word meaning "cross". "Hrotha's town" seems most likely, though, given the existence of two other place names locally, Rothill several miles east and Rothley about ten miles west - if, as seems likely, these are also named after him, Hrotha must have had a nice little territory carved out for himself!



In All Saints Church in Rothbury, remains of an early Saxon cross dating from about 800AD can be found.

Northumberland suffered greatly from attacks by the Vikings from about 793 AD and, later, was subject to repeated invasions by the Scots, who wished to absorb it into their own kingdom.

Following the Norman Conquest in 1066, England's new rulers took little interest in this part of the world, until it became evident that it needed to be used as a bulwark against Scottish incursions. As a result, the whole area became a fortified zone, with many major castles and walled towns. Locally, a line of "pele towers" and castles from Hepple to Warkworth was constructed to protect this part of the border region. Almost every village had some sort of defensive stronghold, some large, some small - many can still be found (sometimes in ruins) in places such as Tosson, Whitton, Thropton, Cartington, Edlingham and so on. Rothbury also had its own Castle above the river not far from the Church but it was finally demolished in 1869 to make way for an extension to the Churchyard.

## HARBOTTLE CASTLE AND THE D'UMFRAVILLES



The most important military centre locally was [Harbottle Castle](#) in Coquetdale near Rothbury, first built in the latter part of the 12th century by Odinell D'Umfraville, but now in ruins, to keep order in the Borders and to help protect the region against marauding Scots.

## BORDER WARFARE AND BORDER REIVERS

From Rothbury to the Border and beyond remains of fortified towers at Tosson, Whitton, Thropton and Hepple, dating from the 12th and 13th centuries, castles at Cartington, Edlingham and Harbottle, and bastles can be found - all reminders of Northumberland's turbulent past.



During the centuries of border warfare, a vast strip of land north and south of the border became "the debatable land", populated by wild and lawless families (perhaps clans would be a more appropriate term) known as [Border Reivers](#).

The population of these "badlands" owed little allegiance to either England or Scotland and, no doubt, took advantage of the breakdown of law and order by engaging in a life of cattle raiding, looting, pillaging, illicit whisky distilling and smuggling.

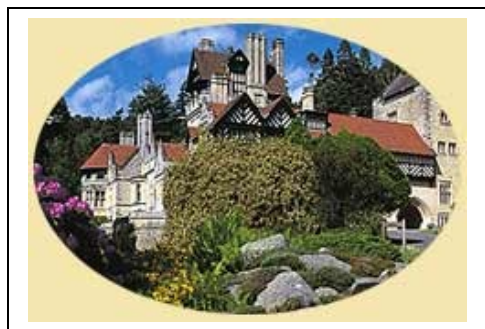
Deadly blood feuds were common between the local families and, when disputes occurred, loyalties took no account of national borders...the well-known Armstrongs, for instance, were found on both sides of the border and would support one another when the need arose!

Following the accession of James 1 to the English throne, thus uniting England and Scotland the prevailing lawlessness slowly subsided but the area was still occasionally ravaged by warfare. In 1648 the Roundheads (parliamentarians) marched on Great Tossan, Lorbottle and Cartington Castle. Cartington was ordered to be pulled down by the parliamentarians because the then landowner Lord Edward Widdrington was a Royalist.

## **LORD ARMSTRONG OF CRAGSIDE**

Following the above Union of England and Scotland, the importance of the area as a defensive region diminished and what little prosperity there was gradually ebbed away.

Bishop Pocock on visiting Rothbury in 1760 wrote: 'The town is a poor town of two streets, most of the houses are thatched in heather'. Today a heather thatch can be seen at the Cragside estate.



During the 19th century under the guidance of [Lord Armstrong of Cragside](#), much of the village was renovated and today the village has the appearance of a smart 19th century small town.

The Cragside estate, home of Lord Armstrong – one of Britain's great Victorians was the first house in the world lit by hydroelectricity and it has the largest sandstone rock garden in Europe.