



Bamburgh Castle in evening sunshine

Northumberland gets ‘seal of approval’

Helen Werin’s coastal tour takes in charming castles, peaceful islands and the cutest wildlife

We’ve come to the Farne Islands expecting to see seals – lots of them – but not for a performance. At least that’s what it looks like. The cutest young seal, with huge liquid eyes and a heart-achingly doleful expression, lifts his little flipper in what looks for all the world like a staged farewell as our boat sails away. He may be one of literally dozens of white and brown-spotted youngsters flopped all over these rocks, but his appealing ‘gesture’ is etched in our memories.

It seems that these seals are used to the attention and not afraid of us at all. It’s not surprising really since our small boat is one

of seven similar vessels operated by Billy Shiel and all called Glad Tidings – though each one is numbered to save confusion. The boats make frequent year-round trips to see the seals and all the other wildlife on these rocky islands off the coast of Northumberland.

Andy, one of the National Trust rangers resident for nine months of the year on the largest island, Inner Farne, describes it best. He tells me that living here is “like being on a David Attenborough film set”. He’s not exaggerating. We’ve arrived at the best time of year to see baby Atlantic and grey seals. Around 1,000 are born each autumn. At other times there’s a



A Farne Islands’ seal



View down Marygate towards the town hall, Berwick upon Tweed



Alnmouth on a golden evening

virtual carpet of birds. Andy reels off a few statistics for this 'hotspot'; 30,000 Redwing in a day, 6,000 British birds per hour, 1,000 Goldcrest on the island at once. And the best piece of advice that the rangers can give visitors? Bring a hat! In the spring you're almost guaranteed to get dive-bombed by Arctic Terns and very likely to be pecked or pooped on. "Probably both," Andy laughs. He points to just outside the draughty stone building which serves as the information centre. Around late May/early June we'd have to watch our steps here as chicks would be running around all over the place.

As it is we're watching the weather as it brings stinging rain. While other boat trippers huddle for shelter with their sandwiches in the 14th century St Cuthbert's chapel, we try to absorb some of the away-from-it-all atmosphere that these islands exude. We may be just a couple of miles off the coast of bustling Seahouses, with its very popular fish and chip shops, but the feeling is of being in a far more remote spot. Inside the chapel is a plaque in memory of Grace Darling, the legendary lighthouse-keeper's

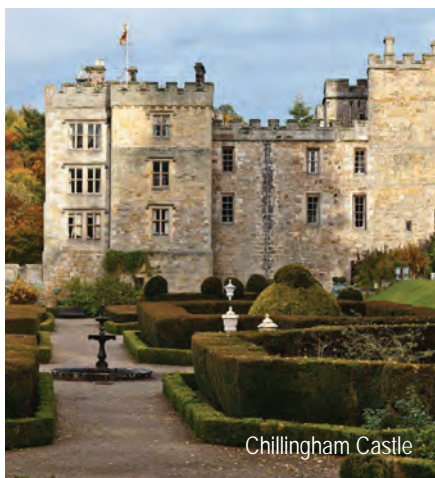
daughter who helped to rescue nine survivors from the wreck of the supposedly unsinkable Forfarshire. Our boat has followed part of the route Grace rowed with her father through the raging seas, taking us out to Longstone in the outer group of the Farnes where she lived.

Back on the mainland, I'm peacefully contemplating the views of Bamburgh Castle and Holy Island from Spittal, just south of Berwick upon Tweed. The surfer I've been watching approaches to tell me about the dozens of dolphins he's seen that day. My daughter Sophie, who's been playing on the

beach out of earshot, runs over to tell us that she's just seen dolphins out in the bay. It's starting to add up to one of those trips she'll always remember.

It's an altogether different creature that makes an overwhelming impression on us next day. Bats! We'd heard amusing anecdotes from other visitors of their time at Chillingham Castle. Ghosts and curses, torture chambers and secret underground passages – how can we resist?

The place is full of the most eclectic and eccentric mix of clutter I've ever seen. Probably the most expensive and certainly the most fascinating clutter at that. The castle is also one of the spookiest, draughtiest buildings I've ever been inside. My husband describes it as something out of a Hammer Horror movie. The fact that there's a huge gold bat atop the wind vane – it's the family emblem and on the coat of arms – all adds up to (and pardon the pun) an extremely chilling atmosphere. The place is also full of bats. I notice tell-tale droppings on furniture and on the table dressed for dinner. In the corners of the high ceilings are holes where they presumably roost. Spooky!



Chillingham Castle

Warning signs outside the dungeons alert us to what lurks inside. Torture instruments of days gone by and life size replicas of tortured bodies are laid out to cause “maximum shock”, says the sign. Anyone of a nervous disposition is advised not to enter. Of course, this is like a red rag to a bull to Sophie. She’s in there in the eerie darkness, alone, before I can say “aarghh”. My first thought after daring to enter is that the health and safety inspectors have not been anywhere near here. Just as well. It’s enough to give them a nasty shock. Right in front of me in the gloom is a wooden chair, its seat is row upon row of 30 sharp spikes. Yes, I touched them to see just how sharp they were. I peer closer and spot the sign on the chair-back. It reads; “Do not sit on this chair because it is old and delicate”.

Sophie disappears. I find her with her hand inside a tall wooden chamber which looks like a cross between an Egyptian mummy and a giant Russian doll. She pulls it out fast, then pushes my hand in. I can feel long spikes at stomach level on either side. There are no signs anywhere saying ‘Do Not Touch’. It’s warning enough to read, in the entrance, about the ills and misfortunes that have apparently plagued people who have ‘borrowed’ items from Chillingham.

Chillingham is just one of a string of castles on our schedule. Bamburgh, Lindisfarne, Dunstanburgh and Alnwick castles have to be the most iconic images of the Northumberland coast, centre stage on a zillion postcards. We can’t go in to Alnwick Castle, famous as Hogwarts in the Harry Potter films, because it’s shut for the season. But a few miles down the road is Warkworth Castle, dominating the picturesque village from a hilltop above the River Coquet.

Our focus from besides the causeway over to Holy Island (aka Lindisfarne) is on the last-minute ‘dashers’ who are more like ‘splashers’ as they surge across as the tide comes in. Despite the ubiquitous serious warning notices with a picture

of a car up to its windows in the North Sea, there’s always one...

Ten minutes after a minibus sails across, throwing up spray like a water chute, a van attempts the crossing. By now waves are breaking over the causeway. After a tense pause, it thinks better of it and reverses. It will be nearly six hours before it can return to the mainland. Perhaps it’s no bad thing because undoubtedly the best time on Holy Island is when most of the other motorists have fled back across the causeway and the only incomers arrive by boat. With no ant-like stream of people swarming up to the castle, all over the ancient priory or around the visitor centre, cafes and small shops in the village, the place takes on an entirely different atmosphere. We meander around upturned-boat sheds, once a common sight in fishing villages on the east coast, and along deserted old wagonways from the days of the limestone industry here. From the shoreline we are treated to spectacular views of the landmark castle. The sense of peace is glorious.

Our guide Claire recommends we visit the 14th century Preston Pele Tower at Chathill. Unlike the keep at Warkworth, this is a tower built for survival, not comfort. We peer in to the guardroom where prisoners would have been held and struggle through a tiny door in to a bedroom furnished as around 1400 with slits for windows and walls three feet thick. We’re so intrigued by the

history written on the walls that we don’t notice the time.

Just as we climb to the top to look out over the lovely gardens and the woodland of beech trees the clock strikes, right next to us. The boom is so immense that we nearly jump out of our skins. Sophie thinks it hilarious. After all the unspoilt atmosphere and tranquillity that we’ve experienced along this coastline, it seems rather a memorable bang to go out with.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

- * www.visitnorthumberland.com
- * www.lindisfarne.org.uk

NORTHUMBERLAND’S CASTLES

- * Alnwick: Home to the Earls and Dukes of Northumberland since 1309, this is one of the largest inhabited castles in England and is known as The Windsor of the North. It’s been the backdrop for many films and TV series, including Elizabeth and Blackadder.
- * Bamburgh: This landmark castle in a dramatic setting on a whinstone outcrop high above the coast. Fantastic views of the Farne Islands and Lindisfarne Castle. Loads to see inside: spectacular King’s Hall, massive keep with a collection of armoury bearing the scars of battle.
- * Chillingham: Owner Sir Humphrey Wakefield’s interesting collection turns up bath chairs and cattle skulls hundreds of thousands years old and burial cists in the cellar. The pièce de résistance is a wooden bath which once belonged to Marie Antoinette and also to Mick Jagger.

The Rolling Stone had bought it for his Paris apartment.

- * Warkworth: Once home to the powerful Percy family who now live in Alnwick Castle and also to Harry Hotspur, bane of Scottish raiders. Free audio tour takes in great hall, gatehouse and circuit of towered walls.

- * Lindisfarne: This small fortress first built in 1550 and renovated by Arts and Crafts architect Edwin Lutyens is now looked after by the National Trust. A lot of the fort was built with stone ‘recycled’ from the old priory.



Warkworth Castle