

Berwick-upon-Tweed

England's most northerly town has a history to match the drama of the Northumberland coast. Suzy Pope explores a seaside haunt of border feuds and windswept shores



Growing up outside Berwick-upon-Tweed, I never appreciated its unique position in British history, or its shambling beauty. Anyone who has been on an East Coast Main Line train as it crosses the Victorian viaduct over the Tweed will have heard the intake of breath as passengers crane their necks for views over the red rooftops that tumble alongside the river to the sea. That was the moment I realised Berwick was special.

As a child, it never occurred to me that the remains of a medieval stronghold would be out of place in a Somerfield car park, or that the Town Hall steps where I munched sausage rolls were the same ones that inspired one of LS Lowry's most famous paintings. Returning as an adult, I now appreciate not just the quiet awe I see in the day trippers, but the history all around me.

In 1603, Scottish king James VI crossed the border at Berwick on his way to being crowned James I of England and Ireland. This Union of the Crowns finally smoothed relations between Scotland and its neighbour – a period during which Berwick was very much in the firing line.

As England's most northerly town, it changed hands between the Scots and the English 13

times from the 12th century until surrendering to English rule in 1482. Back then it was a fortress town, and you can still see the remains of Berwick Castle, wander the walls of the old town and walk through the gates where the night porters once forbid anyone from entering after curfew.

The town's heart is the River Tweed, which cuts through its centre and ferries one of the UK's largest colonies of mute swans between the three striking bridges that connect Tweed-bank with old Berwick. This year marks four centuries since the completion of the iconic stone bridge – commissioned by James I – that still links the two banks of the town.

Most visitors use Berwick as a base to explore the Northumberland coast, where border skirmishes and the threat of Norse invaders left a litany of seaside castles in their wake. Explore sprawling sands and medieval wonders at Bamburgh, join puffin cruises in Seahouses and Amble, and dine on kippers in quiet Craster.

There's plenty to keep you busy in and around Berwick too, from hiking the newly crowned King Charles III Coastal Path to visiting the tidal island of Lindisfarne. Though few would begrudge you just quietly soaking up the history of a border town with a tale or two to tell. ▶

55.7702° N, 2.0054° W

Ask a local

"Berwick is a town of borders – and I don't just mean the historic boundary between Scotland and England, but the border between the sea and the river. I cross the bridge into work every morning and it still takes my breath away. Walking the old walls is the best way to get a feel for the town's geography and history. In an hour you can see the Barracks, the bridges and the beach."

Ruby Rosamund,
The Green Shop,
Berwick-upon-Tweed



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Bridging the past (left page) Berwick's Grade I-listed Victorian viaduct was designed by Robert Stephenson, son of the Northumberland-born 'Father of the Railways' George Stephenson; (this page; clockwise from top left) the ruins of Berwick's once-mighty fortifications; mute swans drift effortlessly along the River Tweed; the town's 355m-long Old Bridge became the longest in Britain when it was completed in 1624, and was the first fully stone bridge to carry the Great North Road between London and Edinburgh; Berwick is well placed for day trips along the Northumberland coast; the stark beauty of Cocklawburn Beach



DAY 1

Start the day in Berwick's historic centre. The **Castle Gate Bridge** above the Marygate affords a view of the Town Hall that inspired one of LS Lowry's most famous paintings. From here you can follow the **Lowry Trail** (berwickpreservationtrust.co.uk), taking in the Elizabethan walls, the old stone bridge and nature trail to **Spittal Beach** (pictured above). Looping back into the heart of Berwick, peruse the shops on **Bridge Street** and stop in **Northern Soul Kitchen** (19 West Street) for a zero-waste lunch. Check out what's on at the **Malting's Theatre** before exploring the collections in the **Berwick Barracks**, home of the Berwick Museum and King's Own Scottish Borderers Museum. From the quayside, follow the **Berwick Estuary Walk** to admire the iconic viaduct – of vintage-railway-poster fame – and watch the swans glide by. On the edge of town you'll find the ruins of **Berwick Castle**, then make your way back into the centre as the sun sets, casting the viaduct in a golden light. Back on Bridge Street, fine dining awaits at **Audela** (audela.co.uk), while **The Barrels** opposite is a cosy pub for a nightcap.

Getting there: Berwick is on the East Coast Main Line, ideal for arrival by train. Most LNER and Lumo trains from London to Edinburgh stop at Berwick (LNER tickets from London Kings Cross cost from £41.90 one way). It's a ten-minute stroll into town from the station. If you're arriving by car, Berwick sits just off the A1.

Stay at: Set within the Elizabethan walls of Berwick and overlooking the River Tweed, the aptly named **The Walls B&B** (thewallsberwick.com) offers antique-furniture-filled rooms and a hearty, home-cooked breakfast every morning. You can watch the swans drift by from each river-view room and feel the history emanating from foundations dating back to 1750, especially in the main lounge where the comforting tick of the grandfather clock sounds. Doubles from £105pn (breakfast included).



DAY 2

Your second day begins on the quayside and **The Lookout** coffee house, which is hidden in the arches of the old bridge. From here you can hike or bike along the coast, following the **Northumberland Coast Path** beyond Spittal and out into the countryside. You'll soon reach **Cocklawburn Beach**, a vast, near-empty shore where a solitary ice cream van sits on the clifftop no matter the weather. After you've passed the old lime pits and stretches of golden sand, the tidal causeway to the **Holy Island of Lindisfarne** comes into view, 19km from Berwick. If you time it right with the tides, you can be on the island for a couple of hours to stop for fresh crab sandwiches at **The Island Shack**, explore the gardens and history of **Lindisfarne Castle** (pictured above) and spend time in the haunting, skeletal ruins of **Lindisfarne Priory**, which was sacked by Norse pillagers in 793 AD, signalling the start of the Viking Age across Europe. Cycle or get the bus back to Berwick, which leaves in time with the tidal crossing and brings you back for locally cured charcuterie and wine at **Atelier** (atelier.cafe) on Bridge Street.



4 TOP THINGS TO DO

SHOP in the independent stores along Bridge Street. The Green Shop (at No 30) has a range of organic local food supplies and homemade handicrafts, while Slightly Foxed Books (foxedquarterly.com) is the bookshop of your wildest dreams, with pile upon pile of second-hand paperbacks towering to the ceiling and sofas inviting you to try before you buy.

SAIL OUT into the North Sea or upriver along the Tweed from the quayside. In summer, the Border Belle (berwickboattrips.co.uk; from £15pp) runs great-value boat trips to spot seabirds and dolphins in the waters off the coast. It also offers leisure cruises up the Tweed and along to the Old Chain Bridge at the Scottish Border.

WANDER the Elizabethan walls that encase the old town of Berwick. The entire route takes around an hour, passing the town beach, sea links golf course and some of the regal-looking Edwardian houses that gaze out to the sea.

CROSS the England-Scotland border on foot. The Berwickshire Coastal Path stretches for 45km north of Berwick, winding up into Scotland via Eyemouth, and finishes at Cocksburnpath. Along the way it dips into tiny fishing villages and rounds the National Nature Reserve at St Abbs, known for its rowdy nesting seabird colonies (May-July). **W**