

Stuart's Short Stories for Short Breaks

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Hadrian's Wall
1 of 15 Stories



*A colossal feat of engineering, licking stones,
a whispering wall and Wittinail and I*

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The Pyramids of Egypt, the Great Wall of China, the Cathedral of Notre-Dame; all construction wonders of the world from a time long before hi-visibility tabards and hard hats. But did you know that little old Blighty boasts its own bit of building work that is classed as a masterpiece of human creative genius'?

Choosing to invade Hadrian's Wall country by National Express (all the chariots were fully booked) I jumped off at Carlisle and caught a cab. But it wasn't just your run-of-the-mill black cab. Oh no, I made sure it was a bio-diesel cab, ensuring I was 'doing my bit' to help preserve the wall's fragile environment for future millennia.

There are fourteen major Roman sites, forts, museums and countless milecastles and turrets to explore along the wall (of course, not all of it is standing now) and you can choose to walk its entire length if you so wish, but, with just a weekend at my disposal, I chose to take in the historical sights of Birdoswald Fort.

“ Conjuring up an evocative picture of Roman military life, the first thing that struck me about Birdoswald was its impossibly picturesque setting. Perched over the river Irthing, with picture postcard views for miles around, if you had to be stationed somewhere cold and far from beakers of good Italian wine, this would at least have a beautiful aspect to lessen the homesickness. ”

Birdoswald is unique in that at no other point along the wall can all the components of the Roman Frontier system be found in such a small area and was an important base for more than one thousand soldiers. It also displays the best-preserved defences of any wall fort with three of the four main gateways having been unearthed as well as the outside walls, two granary buildings, workshops and a unique drill hall. (No cement mixers or portaloos to be seen though.)

Feeling like an inexpert extra in Tony Robinson's Time Team, I made my way to the visitor centre where I was treated to the intriguing story of the fort and its inhabitants for the last two thousand years including border raids in the middle ages and 20th century archaeological discoveries. Most impressive was a life-size reconstruction of a section of the wall itself complete with Roman Legionnaire peering over the top. Tour over, and finding that the AD122 Hadrian's Wall country bus was just about to depart, I stepped aboard and



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was soon meandering through the austere but lovely north Cumbrian countryside bound for the magnificent castle of Carlisle and its legendary 'licking stones'.

The award-winning bus offers the most relaxing and environmentally friendly way of travelling around Hadrian's Wall and runs right through the summer between Newcastle and Carlisle stopping at attractions, towns and villages along the way. Carlisle Castle, looming above BBC Cumbria, has seen its fair share of gore, bloodshed, conflicts and sieges during its time, and the day I arrived was no exception. Hordes of school children had descended on the place and were in their element as they re-enacted knighthood tales. Or Star Wars, more likely.

There's so much to see in the castle that it's difficult to know what to visit first, but having heard so much about the 'licking stones', I had to satisfy my curiosity straight away. The oldest and most impressive surviving building in the castle is the 12th century keep and it's on the first floor level that I discovered the 'stones'.

“ As the story goes, the room was utilised as the dungeon during the Jacobite Rising and, being more than a little parched, prisoners would lick the stones in a desperate effort to obtain sufficient moisture to keep alive only to be brutally executed on Gallows Hill. ”

Not in the slightest bit tempted to taste the stones myself, (I much prefer a drop of the local Jennings Cumberland Ale) I explored the castle further visiting ancient chambers, clambering up stone stairways, peering into sinister dungeons and gaols (the original gaol doorway is on display as are carvings on the gaol wall) and taking in the famous tower where Mary Queen of Scots was once imprisoned.

Not wanting to become the castle's next enforced inhabitant, I chose to leave while the going was good and it wasn't long before I was tucking into lunch at the award-winning restaurant found at the heart of Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery. Set in beautiful Roman and Jacobean gardens and with a handsome red and yellow sandstone facade, Old Tullie House is home to a nationally important collection of Pre-Raphaelite art and still has many classical Jacobean features in pristine condition including a large ground floor fireplace and Jacobean oak staircase. However, the museum is also home to a number of rather futuristic works of art with one piece in particular catching my eye, or rather my ears. The Whispering Wall is an artwork by Stephen Skryna and comprises a wall of glass bricks in which various objects are set, along with a number of small audio speakers. Yes, it's a very simple idea, but it's also highly effective, too. From the Millennium Gallery to the Art Gallery, the Carlisle Life Gallery to the Border Galleries where a wide-screen audio-visual spectacular dragged me back to the lawless borders of Tudor times where rapacious local feuding families – known as the Border Rievers – plundered cattle, burned homes and fought amongst themselves in centuries of warfare between England and Scotland. Sounds just like an average episode of Eastenders, I know.



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Leaving behind the clash of steel and the thundering of hooves I went in search of a slightly more sedate environment at the Rose and Crown Pub in Low Hesket. A few pints of the obligatory Jennings's Ale later and I was feeling far more relaxed. In fact, so laid back had I become that I'd completely forgotten to check into my contemporary country retreat: The Weary Inn. Formerly known as The Weary Sportsman, The Weary Inn, Castle Carrock, can be found just outside Carlisle and from first appearances gives the impression of a traditional country inn. Once inside I was quite taken aback, as far from being adorned in horse brasses and tankards, The Weary is a contemporary, modern, boutique-style residence with all mod cons. What's more, the food was rather special too. Chargrilled Swordfish Steak followed by Strawberry and Champagne Cheesecake is a must if you ever happen to stay there. Back in my room and with a luxurious king-size bed to sink into, I soon drifted off and enjoyed a pleasant night's sleep; except when I woke in the dead of night convinced the bedroom walls were talking to me. I'll put it down to one ale too many in the Rose and Crown.

The next morning, curls of bacon on fluffy scrambled eggs set me up 'good and proper' for my visit to the town of Brampton, built from local sandstone and situated in a hollow carved out by glacial action during the ice age. In the centre of the town lies the octagonal Moot Hall which now houses the Tourist Information Centre. Fifteen minutes later and armed with a map and countless leaflets I made my way to St Martin's Church on the outskirts of the town. Famous for being the only church designed by the Pre-Raphaelite architect Philip Webb, I was interested to see the church's stained glass windows, particularly on such a clear and sun-filled day. Blazing with intense colour, each window – and there are a lot of them – pays tribute to the fact that they were designed by an artist who was to become one of the most sought-after painters in Europe.

Leaving the glinting windows behind I felt like stretching my legs as well as making the most of the pleasant day that had been afforded me and so set off in the direction of Talkin Country Park. Boasting one hundred and twenty acres of farmland and woodland, the park is a favourite amongst locals with its centrepiece being the lovely Talkin Tarn which teems with windsurfers, canoeists and today a young couple going round in circles in a rowing boat. Not wanting to risk ending up in 'the drink' I took the safe option and strolled along the path that circumnavigates the tarn eventually arriving at the Boathouse Tearoom which offers superb views of the lake and from where I could sip my tea whilst watching the boating couple continue to flounder. Hiring a bike, I spent the remainder of the day cycling through beautiful countryside.

“ After checking in at The Lodge in Brampton – a recently converted two hundred and sixty-year old shooting lodge – I rustled up a mean Thai Curry, opened a bottle of red and spent a relaxing evening glued to the state-of-the-art TV. I couldn't help thinking how much more pleasant and secure life is in these parts now since the days when a marauding Scot would have crossed the wall and set fire to your outbuildings. ”



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Peering out the window of the National Express coach the next morning as I made my way home, a sign alerted me to the fact that we were passing over Shap summit. Once this was the toughest test of a driver's endurance in England, where long-distance lorry drivers would struggle over the frequently snowbound highest road in the land fortified only by strong tea from the Jungle Café. The Jungle Café is gone and the M6 now makes the trip a little easier than it was in the days of the old A1. Shap is where the cult film 'Withnail and I' was filmed with Crow Cragg the cottage in which Withnail and Marwood stayed lying derelict alongside Wet Sleddale Reservoir. The building sits on private property and cannot be visited by the way, but I was leaving this part of Cumbria having experienced a far more enjoyable time than either of those doomed, dyspeptic thespians. Oh, and don't forget to dig out your best toga.