



*Trip summary*

**OUR MOTORHOME**

Known fondly as Hamish, our Peugeot-based 2002 Auto-Sleeper is easy to heat in chilly weather thanks to its Eberspächer blown-air heater



**THE JOURNEY**

We travelled from Carlisle to Belford and then back inland to Alwinton, spending seven nights on sites in April

**THE COSTS**

Fuel average 30mpg.....	£28
Site fees.....	£185
Attractions two adults: Lindisfarne Priory.....	£14.40



**2002 Auto-Sleeper Symbol**

**270 miles**

**Total £227.40**



# The natural wonders of... NORTHUMBERLAND

Amble ancient byways, enjoy the tranquillity of a famous island and explore beautiful border country on a terrific two-centre trip

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Vivienne Crow



*Vivienne Crow...*

... after years of long-haul travel, freelance writer Vivienne Crow is enjoying getting to know places closer to home in her campervan

**W**here have all the people gone?" It's a question I asked myself several times during my trip to Northumberland but, on this occasion, I was being addressed by a boy aged about 10 or 11 on the main village street on Lindisfarne. This is a place that would normally be packed with people on a sunny afternoon during the school holidays.

"Well, when the tide comes in, the sea floods the road to the island and most visitors go home before that happens," I replied, aware that the two women the boy was travelling with were eagerly awaiting my answer. "Does that mean we're stuck here until the tide turns?" one of them asked, incredulous. They were even more shocked when I told them they'd have nearly five hours to wait until the next safe crossing!

Lindisfarne, also known as Holy Island, is connected to the mainland by a causeway that is open to vehicles for anywhere between six and nine hours at a time, depending on tides. With one of England's most important ecclesiastical sites, a castle and an enormous nature reserve, the causeway and the island get very busy

during safe crossing times. When the sea comes rushing in and the road disappears, however, the one village on the island turns into a ghost town.

When my partner, Heleyne, and I arrived, the island's huge car park was filling up fast, so we decided to head into the dunes on the northern side of the island, leaving the more popular attractions in the south until after the causeway had closed.

We walked north, constantly expecting to see the sea 'just over the next rise', but it was at least 15 minutes before we reached the beach. And what a beach!

It stretched for miles to the west and I couldn't see a single person on it – not even a dog walker. As we wandered Lindisfarne's deserted dunes and beaches, it felt like we'd entered a forgotten world. There were faint trails, but no sign of the walkers and nature-watchers who'd helped to make them.

This off-the-beaten-track landscape is all part of the Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve, which covers a massive 3,500 hectares. We were too early in the year to see the rare orchids and butterflies that thrive in the dunes and too late for the >

**ABOVE** The beach at Sandham on Lindisfarne

**LEFT** Walking in Coquetdale





“As we **wandered** Lindisfarne’s deserted dunes and beaches, it felt like we’d entered a **forgotten** world”

**ABOVE CLOCKWISE**

Lindisfarne’s homes and businesses huddle together in the southwest corner of the island; looking across Budle Bay and Ross Back Sands to Lindisfarne; the ruins of Lindisfarne Priory

huge flocks of brent geese that fly in from Svalbard to spend the winter on the salt marshes and mudflats, but we did see a deer skipping across the sand hills, a Slavonian grebe on The Lough and a few eider ducks in the sea. These stocky, black-and-white sea ducks, famous for their soft down feathers that still occasionally plump up our duvets and pillows, have been associated with Lindisfarne for many hundreds of years.

In the seventh century, St Cuthbert passed a ruling that forbade the island’s monks from eating or disturbing the birds – an edict regarded as one of the world’s first bird protection laws. Even today, the birds are sometimes known as Cuddy ducks; Cuddy being a diminutive form of Cuthbert.

A disused, grassed-over waggon way, once used to transport limestone quarried from the north coast to the industrial lime kilns near the castle, leads from the nature reserve to the south side of the island. The sixteenth-century castle, barely visible under a dense, spider web-like network of scaffolding, was closed to the public for a £3m restoration project, but the lime kilns and a tiny walled garden were still open to visitors. The latter was created in 1911 by the garden designer and writer, Gertrude Jekyll, after the renowned architect, Edwin Lutyens, had rebuilt and refurbished the castle in the Arts and Crafts style.

In the eerily silent village, with the causeway now inaccessible, most businesses

had closed, but we found one café that had stayed open. This, it turned out, was where the marooned family we’d met earlier had decided to set up camp and while away some of their remaining hours on the island. Keen to continue our exploration – and rejuvenated after our coffee and cake – we left them to their loitering.


We headed out past the upturned herring boats in the harbour, now used as sheds by local fishermen and climbed The Heugh. This little ridge of high ground is part of the Great Whin Sill, the same narrow ridge of igneous dolerite rock on which the Roman emperor, Hadrian, built his famous wall further south. The Heugh commands excellent views over the otherwise flat island and provides a bird’s-eye perspective on the ancient priory.

The ruins seen today are largely the remains of the priory church built in 1150, but it was the Irish monk, St Aidan, who first established a monastery here in about AD635. The site is most closely associated with St Cuthbert whose body, undecayed 11 years after his death, caused the island to become a place of pilgrimage and strengthened its reputation as a place of great Christian learning. In the early part of the eighth century, the monks here created the Lindisfarne Gospels, a masterpiece of early medieval art that’s now housed in the British Library in London.

Our visit to Lindisfarne was part of a ▶


**TOP TIPS**

Safe crossing times for the Lindisfarne causeway can be found at

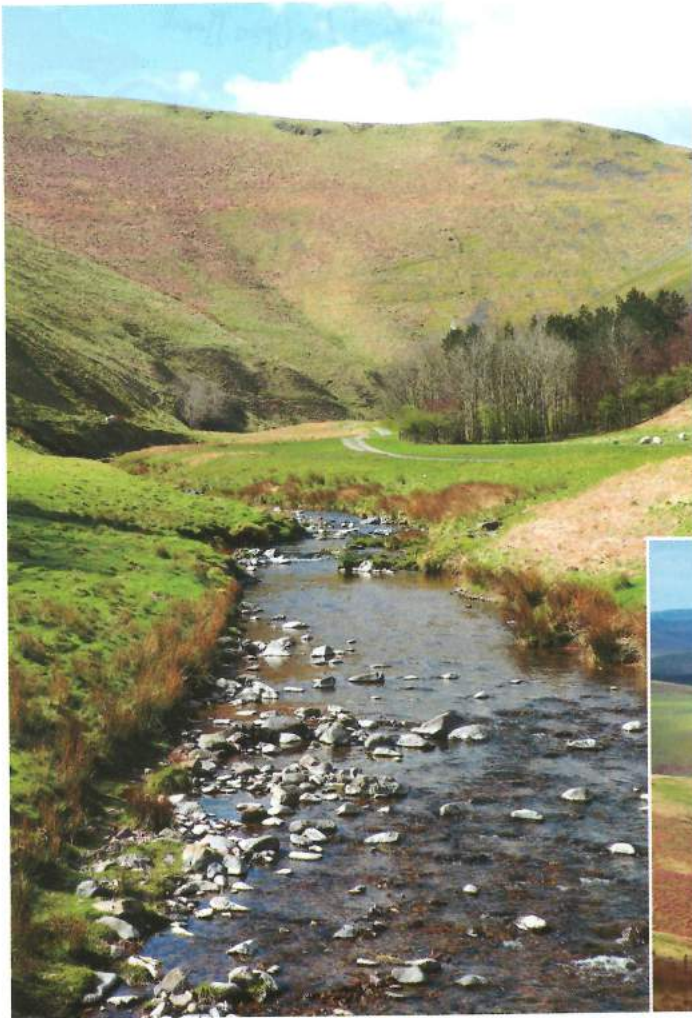
 [northumberland.gov.uk/highways.aspx](http://northumberland.gov.uk/highways.aspx)

Don’t attempt the crossing outside these times – many motorists have been rescued by lifeboat or even helicopter after ignoring warnings

If you prefer to walk to Lindisfarne, you can follow the three-mile **Pilgrims’ Way** across the sands. The route is indicated by a line of tall poles. It takes two hours to walk to Lindisfarne and you’re advised to start at least two hours before low tide. Never cross on a rising tide

 [northumberlandcoast.aonb.org/pilgrims-way/](http://northumberlandcoast.aonb.org/pilgrims-way/)





two-centre trip to north Northumberland.

Our first couple of nights were spent at the South Meadows Caravan Park at Belford, just a few miles from the coast. The large, well-equipped and friendly site lies on the southern edge of the attractive village, not far from the A1.

It's a 15-minute walk from the site to the centre of Belford, which has three pubs, a café, a chippy and a decent-sized Co-op store. Even closer to South Meadows is Sunnyhills, a farm shop and café, which is open from 9am most days for excellent cooked breakfasts.

From Belford, we moved inland to Alwinton and the Clennell Hall Riverside Holiday Park – overpriced in terms of facilities, but priceless if you're looking for a truly out-of-the-way spot to park up for a few nights.

Alwinton is a tiny village in Upper Coquetdale, right in the heart of the Cheviot Hills. There's not much here really, just a pub, some cottages and a few farms.

The road through this glorious valley goes nowhere. It winds its way upstream for 9½ miles from Rothbury to Alwinton, the last village, and then continues for another 12½ miles, climbing through the hills all the while, until it ends on the edge

**ABOVE CLOCKWISE** The Usway Burn flows through a beautiful Coquetdale side valley; the single track road in upper Coquetdale; the rolling Cheviot Hills

of the Ministry of Defence's vast Otterburn Training Area.

We drove to the end of the road one day, just to see what's there. There's nothing!

Pennine Way hikers pass close by on the final leg of their 268-mile journey along England's spine. Going back in time, the Romans also walked this way, but all that remains of their marching camps at Chew Green are a few lumps and bumps in the landscape. Don't get me wrong, though, it was a great drive and well worth the effort.

Upper Coquetdale isn't a place you come to for sightseeing; it's a place either for kicking back and doing nothing or for enjoying the great outdoors. We were here for the hills. There were countless opportunities for walks from the campsite and we enjoyed four superb days exploring the area on foot.

Clennell Street, referred to as the 'great road of Yarnspeth' in medieval documents, passes within a few hundred yards of >

**"It's an atmospheric spot – otherworldly, even. It's not hard to see why it has a magical reputation"**



Clennell Hall. It's an ancient route that used to be one of the most important thoroughfares for drovers moving cattle from Scotland to the markets of England. It crosses the border on the main, windswept ridge of the Cheviot Hills, just northeast of Windy Gyle, at a point that is nearly 1,805ft (550m) above sea level.

On our first day in the area, we followed it north for 5½ miles – over rolling hills and through lonely forest – to a beautiful spot on the Usway Burn, less than two miles short of the Scottish border. The old byway led us down to the grassy banks of the burn, just above a tiny waterfall where dippers bobbed up and down on the boulders. How could we resist such an impeccable picnic spot?

After a long, leisurely lunch, we decided the Usway would make a convivial companion for our walk back to Coquetdale so, turning our backs on the border, we followed the sinuous route it had carved through the steep-sided hills all the way back to the main valley.

Other days were spent climbing to isolated Wether Cairn – on the edge of the Cheviot Hills' heather-covered grouse moors – and exploring the area around Harbottle, Coquetdale's penultimate village.

Henry II ordered the building of a castle at Harbottle in the middle of the twelfth century to defend against the Scots. Because of its proximity to the border, the fortress saw a lot of action and was repeatedly

### TOP TIPS

There are two campsites next to each other at **Clennell Hall**. As you enter the grounds, fork right for the Clennell Hall Riverside Holiday Park, or left for the less formal and cheaper camping area (no hook-up) on the hall's lawns. Clennell Hall Country House is a hotel and has a friendly bar serving good, hearty pub grub to both resident and non-residents

attacked by Scottish forces, falling to them on several occasions. In 1436 it became the base of one of the wardens of the Marches, whose unenviable job it was to attempt to police the unruly border region where marauding reiver clans robbed and murdered, bringing terror to the no-man's land between the two countries.

Now, apart from the sound of gunfire and the odd explosion from the military ranges to the south, the area is peaceful. The castle, robbed of its defensive role, is in ruins.

We wandered from the village up to the Drake Stone, said, in folklore, to have the power to heal sick children. A little trail leads up to the fascinating jumble of sandstone boulders surrounding this enormous rock.

It's an atmospheric spot – otherworldly, even. It's not hard to see why it has a magical reputation. And what about those long lines of scratches on the sandstone? What sort of beast created those?

An information panel at the base of the crags suggests they're the result of ice action during the last glacial period, but who knows? The sense of eerie foreboding was intensified by the presence nearby of signs bluntly warning of the dangers of going off-piste on these bleak, boulder-studded moors. "Do not touch any military debris. It may explode and kill you." No beating about the bush there!

The highlight of our few days in ►

**BELOW CLOCKWISE** Walking a section of the Pennine Way along the England-Scotland border; warning sign on the edge of the MoD's Otterburn Training Area; feral goat grazing in the Cheviot Hills







**ABOVE** The River Coquet meandering through Northumberland

Alwinton – other than the tasty game pie served up in the bar of Clennell Hall – was a walk along the Border Ridge.

On this occasion, we woke Hamish, our 'van, from his campsite slumber and drove further up the Coquet to a spot called Buckham's Bridge. An information panel here describes how cross-border routes, such as Clennell Street, would have been used during the Napoleonic Wars to smuggle whisky into England from Scotland, where the duty on spirits was considerably lower.

No smugglers today, though. No cattle drovers, either, or reivers. In fact, on our way up to the border, during our invigorating 3¾-mile walk along the ridge that separates England and Scotland and for much of our return route, we didn't see a soul. Surely this is as about as remote as you can possibly get in modern England?

Our only companions as we strode out along the undulating Pennine Way were the skylarks and the feral goats. These long-horned, primitive British goats live totally wild, descendants of the animals reared by

early Neolithic people.

When they actually escaped from farms is a matter of debate, although some theories suggest they may have been wandering these hills for millennia. They tend to graze either in matrilineal family units or in billy groups, only gathering in larger, mixed gatherings for the autumn rut.

The largest group we saw was a trio of adults with two kids. The young ones looked at us, seemingly intrigued. Maybe, up here in the wilds of the Cheviot Hills, we were the first humans they had ever seen. **MMM**

#### WE STAYED AT

**South Meadows Caravan Park**, South Road, Belford, Northumberland NE70 7DP

☎ 01668 213326 🌐 southmeadows.co.uk 🕒 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £19.50

**Clennell Hall Riverside Holiday Park**, Alwinton, Northumberland NE65 7BG

☎ 01669 650341 🌐 clennellhall.co.uk/contact.htm

🕒 1 March - 31 October £ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £25

#### YOUR TRAVELS

Want to earn money by inspiring readers with your wonderful pictures and interesting experiences? Send 2,000 words • Info for 'Your Motorhome', 'Your Journey' & 'The Costs' • Photos, including one of yourself and your motorhome • But first, read more details here: [motorhome.ma/writetravel](http://motorhome.ma/writetravel) Email 📧 [mmmtravel@warnersgroup.co.uk](mailto:mmmtravel@warnersgroup.co.uk) or post to 📬 **MMM Travel**, Warners Group Publications, West Street, Bourne, Lincs PE10 9PH