

# Lindisfarne and the Farne Islands



The erosion-resistant Great Whin Sill sweeps in an arc across northern England, a line of crags and cliffs utilised by the Romans as the natural fortification on which they built their own wall and which forms a spectacular setting for Bamburgh Castle. Its offshore outcrops, where even the grim North Sea has been unable to batter down its ramparts, are Beblowe Crag on which the homely Lindisfarne Castle stands, and, most easterly, the Farne Islands.

Lindisfarne is very definitely an island, at least some of the time, but you could almost see it as a long, low, sock-shaped headland that has had its toe of dunes washed away and is waiting to have it blown back by the wind to be darned with marram grass.

The road to Lindisfarne leaves the A1 on a hill, descends to cross the main east coast railway line, on between the stone buildings of Beal Farm, skirting fields of barley before reaching the causeway, where a straight tarmac strip stretches out for a mile across tidal sands that become the seabed for about two hours before and three hours after high tide.

Before reaching solid ground the road runs in a two mile curve around the southern fringe of dunes that form the island's western extremity, then a short rise brings visitors to the car park north of the village. The road sign reads Holy Island, a name not unique in Britain to this one.

The approach of cut-off time used to signal a mass exodus of visitors, but that's not so marked today as more people stay to enjoy the relative peace brought by isolation and true island status.

Lindisfarne attracts a wide variety of visitors beyond the merely curious. It is a National Nature Reserve, has something of an industrial past and, most significantly, was for centuries a cradle of civilisation.



## LINDISFARNE AND THE FARNE ISLANDS

The latter is well documented and too extensive to do justice to here, but briefly, here goes anyway. An Anglo-Saxon monastery was established in 635 by St Aidan when, in the days before a united England, Northumbria was its most powerful kingdom. St Cuthbert became Bishop in 685 and after his death his life was commemorated by the creation of that masterpiece of mediaeval art, the Lindisfarne Gospels, now gone the way of all good things that belong elsewhere, to London.

Slaughter and plunder interrupted the monastic life in 793 when the first recorded Viking raid on the British Isles took place. After further raids the site was abandoned in 875 and St Cuthbert's body, apparently still free from decay after 200 years of burial, was removed to the site on which Durham Cathedral was later built.



## OFFSHORE

In 1082, a decade before the foundation of Durham, a new Benedictine priory was begun in memory of St Cuthbert and it is the ruins of this and later monastic buildings that we see to the south of the village today, suffering the fate of all at the Dissolution of the Monasteries, but still attracting pilgrims and the greater number of the island's present day visitors.

The local red sandstone of the 1082 building has not weathered well. The rich Romanesque detail has lost much of its crispness. Yet those familiar with Durham might be able to evoke its former glory by imagining the magnificent cathedral standing in the place of today's ruins.

Across the harbour, sitting sturdily astride its crag is Lindisfarne Castle, built originally with stone taken from the abandoned priory. The castle dates from late Tudor times and was a border fort, made redundant when James VI became James I. It then went on to serve three centuries as an outpost of Berwick Barracks before being abandoned after a short time as a coastguard lookout.

Abandonment and dereliction are, apparently, what many visitors expect to see, and they are somewhat surprised when they arrive in the entrance hall. Here I have to admit to a degree of smugness, as I knew what this building had become and had looked forward to this moment with a great deal of anticipation.

Lindisfarne Castle is now an Edwardian country house, converted as a holiday home for Edward Hudson, founder of *Country Life*, in his 'spartan romantic' style by Sir Edwin Lutyens. He was an architect of genius so highly thought of that when he died in 1944 the architectural press bore black borders as if mourning the loss of the King.

Although quite plain inside with whitewashed walls, exposed stonework and patterned brick floors, the castle, helped by its small-scale rooms, feels warm and welcoming with some great views and clever touches of detail to keep you absorbed. The sturdy Durham Cathedral-like columns in the entrance hall are a neat historical allusion.

A confession: I try to experience all of my professional journeys as anyone else would, hoping to demonstrate how easy it is to enjoy these amazing islands around our coast. However, I have two very good friends in Berwick who work here and they fixed it for me to meet Bill, the man who had been looking after it for the National Trust for more than a decade. So, four days after I visited incognito, I went back on the day they are closed to the public, saw the rooms you don't get to see, and we sat at the kitchen table for a couple of hours drinking coffee and chatting about life on Lindisfarne.

This was the first island on my current travels to be a normal working

*Lindisfarne Castle*



community with a village not unlike many on the mainland, easy to relate to and not difficult to imagine living in.

It soon became clear to both of us that my main concern would be the isolation brought by high water. You get used to fitting the supermarket trip around the tides, but what about emergencies? He was from the mainland and acknowledged that his wife had that problem. What if there was an accident and she was needed to look after a grandchild? I put the what if someone needed to be rushed to hospital at high tide? question. That's easy, the air ambulance comes up from Blyth.

What if there is a fire? There's a fire station with a tender but no crew. There was a retained crew, but when the service needed to 'rationalise' it came down to losing one at Belford, Berwick or Lindisfarne. If there's a fire a tender from Belford or Berwick goes to the causeway and an RAF rescue helicopter flies up from Boulmer, collects the crew and flies them to Lindisfarne. The island's tender is not allowed off in case its return is prevented by the tide, and if there is a fire...

To finish, a question you're all probably wondering about; is the castle haunted?

A decorator touching up the whitewash one closed season heard the sound of marching feet, at first thinking it something on a radio until the sound grew louder. The shadowy shape of a figure passed down the passageway where he was working. He drew it and it was identified as a seventeenth century soldier from Berwick Barracks.

The Farne Islands vary from 15 to 28 according to the tide, and are an inner and an outer group between one and a half and five miles offshore. No one lives here permanently anymore. There have been monastic communities (St Cuthbert lived on Inner Farne) and several lighthouses, two of which still operate, but since 1925 the islands have been owned by the National Trust which manages them to protect the precious seabird communities.

One thing I had already learned is that people go mad for puffins. I prefer mine braised Faroese style, but most people seem content just to see one waddling about a cliff top.

Studying my fellow passengers as we boarded the *M.V. Golden Gate's* trip at Seahouses I had the impression that most were here mainly for that purpose. I am sure that for some there was a 'because it's there' motivation and there were a few who looked as if they were dressed more for an afternoon swanning around Marks and Spencer, but I think that if I'd shouted out 'What do we want?' their instant response would have been 'Puffins!' 'When do we want them?' 'Now!'

Well we didn't have to wait too long. Nothing needed to be said, just one agitated person pointing was enough to bring everyone to hysterical detonation point.



Golden Gate at Longstone  
with lighthouse shadow

Sure enough, in a blur of wings a plump black and white body (you stuff them with a seasoned cake of breadcrumbs and dried fruit) cruised past at low level, arrow-straight and with a purpose, a catch of sand eels gripped in its jazzy beak. Soon another, then another, and before long the air was full of the chubby chappies, occasionally swerving to avoid a collision (just serve with new potatoes). We hadn't yet made land, but these shooting stars had already made our day.

After a pause alongside The Pinnacles off Staple Island, a line of magnificent stacks with flat tops packed with guillemots, we landed on Longstone, once the home of Farne's most famous inhabitant, of whom *The Times* wrote: 'Is there in the whole field of human history, or of fiction even, one instance of female heroism to compare for one moment with this?'

Grace Darling was ten when her parents moved to the newly built Longstone Lighthouse where her father was its first keeper. Although modified since, that original 1826 tower is much as they would have known it, with their circular quarters one above the other, as you always envisage them to be but rarely are.

The isolation of their family life on this low, bare, sea-washed rock is unimaginable today, but this was their world, and the intrusion of being thrust into the limelight after her heroic rescue must have been as shocking and profound as it was unwanted.

The only way to see inside the building and to look out of the same window Grace did when she saw the *Forfarshire* wrecked on nearby rocks is to travel on the *Golden Gate*, as the Shiel family who operate it also maintain the lighthouse for Trinity House.

Another confession: Somehow they had discovered the purpose of my trip and wanted to help make it as memorable and useful a day as possible, and they did. Instead of returning to Seahouses I stayed on Longstone with Jack until the second trip came out, giving me the privilege and time to talk with someone who has an intimate understanding of these islands. Not only that, my Berwick friends had arranged with the National Trust's Farne Islands Manager for me to visit the warden on Brownsman, an island not open to the public, and I was taken there in the *Golden Gate* while the second party of the day toured the lighthouse.



puffins and nesting shags,  
Brownsman

Having already flown up to six miles, shags from Farne are known to dive to a depth of 55 metres to catch food.

Little did I realise as I stood with Jack on the gallery outside Longstone's lantern room gazing out across the islands that I was about to have the most extraordinary experience of my life.

Brownsman is a flat island of coarse grass and bare rock, with a ten metre cliff as its southern coast. Close to the landing stage the cliff face was packed with guillemot, razorbill, shag and cormorant; the stench was overwhelming. The warden's cottage, built alongside the remains of the Darlings' previous lighthouse, is reached via a duckboard path that enables the island to be crossed without crushing any puffin burrows (each one is an arm's length into the ground and divides into two, providing a nursing/feeding room and a lounge/bedroom).

Around the cottage a colony of Arctic terns nested on the ground. They lay their eggs anywhere, even on the path and you have to watch every step to avoid treading on eggs or chicks. These are beautiful birds that become understandably aggressive when defending their young. Their bills are described as blood red in colour and I now appreciate why.

I was warned to wear a hat and survived the walk to the cottage reasonably well. Once inside I had an interesting hour or so with the warden and his temporary helpers who were there principally to count the birds (34,500 pairs of puffins alone). Life here is somewhat rustic, but I could appreciate its charm and it was heartening to meet a group of young lads who wanted to do this with their lives, a real 'restoring faith in human nature' experience.

After a while I felt I should be outside. Have you seen the Hitchcock film *The Birds*?

Looking out from the doorway, all was terns; they sat, fluttered and stared. Stepping outside roused them into taking to the air and shrieking. Unlike gulls they can hover, enabling them to defecate with great accuracy and to give you a nasty jab on the head with their long, scalpel like bill, injecting into the bloodstream a mixture of sprat remains and whatever lines their and their chicks' mouths. Each attack is announced with a vigorous and disturbing clicking sound.

The bombardment probably lasted only two minutes, but at the time felt much longer. It wasn't until I later mopped the sweat from my brow that I discovered it was in fact blood. My hat, once dark blue, was now white outside and reddish brown inside. What a trophy. Later reports suggested that no one on the islands can recall anyone else experiencing such a vicious and sustained attack. Now what should that tell me?

Later, back in Berwick, a first; never before had I sat down to a meal with friends having first been hosed down with TCP.