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Outing: Berwick-upon-Tweed fortifications

Derek Sharman

Earlier in February Derek Sharman had spoken to the Society on *The fortifications of Berwick upon Tweed*; on this fascinating walk, Derek told us more as we looked at the defences on the north, east and south sides of the town.

The medieval street plan hasn't changed since the 13th century, so when our tour started at Low Greens, we were following the line of the fastest route from Berwick to Edinburgh (the main route north went west through Duns).

After the Battle of Carham in 1018, the lands north of the Tweed became part of Scotland. Berwick, a seaport dealing with wool, grain and fish, became the most important town in Scotland, its population 4 times that of Edinburgh.

In 1296 Edward I took Berwick for England, and immediately ordered the building of substantial stone walls to replace the timber defences around the medieval town; remains of these **medieval walls** can be seen in the boundaries of gardens to the north of the Greens, and along the north bank of the Tweed estuary. Over the next 220 years border warfare continued and the town changed hands at least 12 times, and the economy of Berwick never recovered.

We went into the ground floor of **Henry VIII's two-storey gun fortress**, which lies outside the medieval walls, to the north of the town, to be a bastion against artillery attack. For maximum strength the fortress was octagonal, like a giant WWII pill box; it was completely self-contained with a well, latrines and fireplaces and flues to draw in fresh air, and the magazine under the captain's accommodation. The kitchen was immediately outside, as a precaution against fire. The fortress was excavated in the 1970s and the layout and features clear to see.

Once the Elizabethan walls were completed, the first floor was demolished and the tower infilled to prevent it an enemy using it, and in the 1570s the tower nearby was rebuilt as a watch tower.

The medieval walls had fallen into disrepair, so Mary Tudor planned to build new defences; her early death left Elizabeth to implement the plan. With advice from Italian Giovanni Portenari, Sir Richard Lee devised state of the art fortifications.

The **Elizabethan walls** were the biggest single expense of Elizabeth's 45-year reign and are the only town walls of their type in the UK. (Similar town defences can now be seen only in Lucca, Italy.)

The walls took 2000 men 10 years to construct. The five bastions ensured that attackers from every possible angle could be stopped by cannon-fire or grape-shot. The walls were surrounded by a moat, fed from a lake dug out at the north of the town and controlled by sluice gates. The moat was 150ft wide, mostly knee-depth but with a 9ft ditch parallel to the walls to catch any would-be waders. Also, to deter attackers from the north, a wide trench was dug from the walls to the sea. Long wooden bridges, with drawbridges, enabled traffic to pass in and out in peacetime.

The cow port is the only gate through the walls that is unaltered. There was a portcullis, and the inner and outer doors were set at an angle so that if one were stormed open the way was still blocked.

Berwick's defences were to protect the whole of the North of England against foreign invaders and also, as there were many catholic families in the North, to be the monarch's power base in the event of any domestic rebellion or insurrection. However, to prevent the commander of the garrison becoming too powerful, he was kept short of

artillery unless specific need arose: at the time of the Spanish Armada there were just 7 canons until more weapons were brought up from the Tower of London.

In 1644, during the Civil War, Cromwell paid Scots soldiers to maintain a garrison at Berwick. They were kept out of mischief building on top of the walls the high earth mounds for gun platforms. Cromwell ordered the buildings outside the walls, including two churches, be demolished to give the garrison clear views of any approaching enemy. Short of space for the soldiers to worship, the parliamentary government paid for a new church to be built; in Puritan style, it was free of ornament and without bells – the town hall bell was used to summon people to services until a narrow tower with a single bell was added for the Queen's coronation in 1953.

The defences proved their value as a deterrent when in 1715 the Jacobites heading south bypassed the town. In 1745 the gunpowder had got damp, and Dutch troops had to bring supplies; the ammunition store was built in 1749.

The soldiers stationed in Berwick were billeted on the townsfolk until the barracks was built in 1721; the barracks became the model for the British army worldwide.

Berwick retained military restrictions until the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815; until then, the gates were locked and a curfew imposed overnight.

As we walked around the walls, our guide pointed out the military hospital, the house that Lowry had wanted to buy, the Governor's House, fine individual Georgian houses, the smokery and the Russian gun. We learned that in WWII Berwick suffered 11 air raids which damaged 25% of the houses, and that English Heritage foots an annual bill of £42,000 to cut the grass.

Berwick certainly has a rich heritage, much of it unique in the UK, and as a result of the tour we will appreciate it all the better.