

Extract from the report of a voyage from Leith Roads to Holland and part of Flanders, in the months of July and August 1817, written in a series of letters from a gentleman to a friend in Edinburgh, and published in the Scots Magazine of Sunday 1 March 1818, page 234.

AN 1817 VISIT TO HOLY ISLAND AND BAMBURGH

Off the Coquet Isle, Saturday 26th.

I need hardly tell you, that our little vessel, when newly fitted up, was considered one of the most commodious and handsome of her class, though those fine and elegant vessels, which now ply between Leith and London, far outstrip her in the size and gay appearance of their apartments. Yet still our cabins are not to be complained of, for, independently of the *births* for the officers of the ship, and a place for the servants of the party, there is a fore and after cabin, where each has a *state-room*, or bed place, with distinct doors. The vessel is also well provided with an attentive and obliging steward, and an excellent cook, with all the necessary furniture of the table. Yet, notwithstanding all this, the change to a landsman, from the manifold apartments and conveniences ashore, together with the retirement and seclusion of the night at home, is so great, that he cannot all at once resign those, even for a short life at sea. Accordingly when the party came to compare notes in the morning, it did not appear that one good night's rest could be made out, after putting the whole together. Nor was this at all imputable to the unnecessary *hollowing out* of the crew, or the noise by treading and passing upon the deck, so commonly complained of on ship-board, for, in this respect, nothing could be more guarded or circumspect on the part of our ship's company. But still one heard the gurgling of the water along the ship's side; - another felt that unpleasant closeness and confinement, perhaps inseparable from the air of a ship, while the creaking of the spars, and the chirping noise of the bulkheads, or partitions, allowed very transient sleep, with long and tiresome periods for meditation. Impatient, therefore, of this sort of furnace, the day and the deck were hailed about the same hour; and, at breakfast-time, it was no unwelcome discovery to find, that the ship, being then about opposite to Holy Island, might just as well go into the harbour there for six hours, during an adverse tide, as keep the sea, from the state of the winds, which were such, as to prevent our getting through the narrow *sound*, between the Fern Isles and the Castle of Bamborough, without much beating and tacking, for which few of the party had any great inclination.

Holy Island presents little that can interest the curious, or engage the attention of the traveller, if we except the ruin of the monastery of the once famous Lindisfern. This religious house is said to have been founded about the year 651, and was again rebuilt, with considerable additions, in 1014. It still presents some curious arches, and is the subject of some of the very beautiful passages in the poem of Marmion. You will readily suppose that I landed here with considerable pleasure, as a place to which I had attached the fondest ideas of the antiquary, and where I expected to meet with all the neat cleanliness and comfort of an English watering-place, connected with a small fort and garrison. But how was I disappointed upon landing at Holy Island, to find a very paltry and irregular village, at some little distance from the sea, and really without any very favourable or accessible bathing-place.



Lindisfarne Priory from an engraving of 1814

The chief employment of the inhabitants of this island, said to be about 500 in number, is the prosecution of the fishing, for which it seems to be every way fitted as a most excellent station; but, as the whole process of *gutting* and curing the fish is conducted close to the village, and as the walls of every inclosure and walk about the place are covered with fish, in proportion to its thriving state as a fishing station, it becomes more unfit for the residence of strangers; for, in whatever direction you turn, the air is

more or less contaminated with noxious and fetid effluvia. Even the very lanes of the village are encumbered with fish garbage. I mention this the more particularly, as Holy Island, under a different system, might not only be extended as a fishing station, but is also particularly well calculated to become a great resort for sea-bathing quarters, were a proper selection made of the grounds for the visitors and the fishers. To obtain this more fully, it would require some attention to be paid to providing a better supply of fresh water, and the establishment of a regular post to communicate over the sands with the mainland.

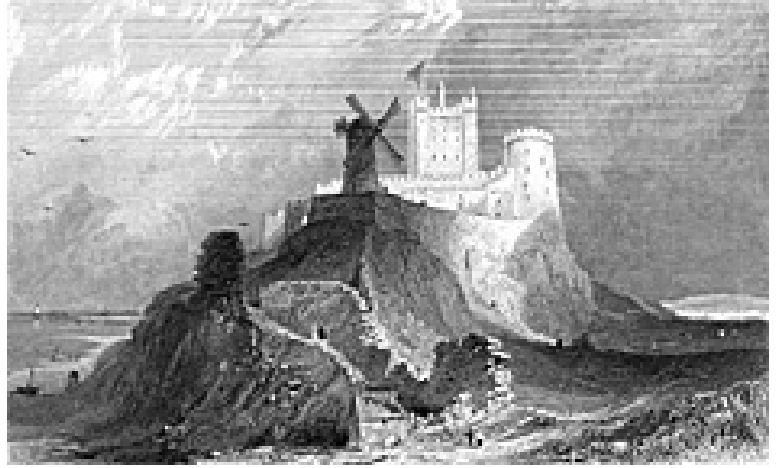


Fisher folk on Holy Island from an 1842 engraving

I was informed, that, independently of the fish caught for the daily consumption of the island, and the supply of the market of Berwick, &c from 30 to 40 tons of salted cod and ling are annually shipped here for London. These formerly sold at the rate of about L.40 per ton; but the price has, of late, fallen about one half, perhaps partly from the present dullness of every kind of merchandise, together with the recent introduction of the Dutch fishermen into our market. If the mind happens to be raised with expectation from any particular object, the effects of disappointment in such cases are much more severely felt than if no such hopes had existed.

I, therefore, turned with peculiar pleasure from Holy Island, and as the wind was favourable, though extremely gentle, we were enabled to land for a short time, in passing, at Bamborough Castle. This is a structure, not only curious as a building but interesting as a charitable foundation, being, along with a great extent of lands, placed under the direction of the Bishop of Durham, by the late Nathaniel Lord Crewe, for pious and benevolent purposes. The castle is understood to have been originally founded in the year 558, and was one of the Roman stations in this part of the country. It is probable that Lord Crewe, during his occasional residence here, had been so much affected with the frequency of shipwrecks, and the distressing scenes inseparable from such accidents, that he established a set of signals here, to forewarn the mariner of his danger, and amply endowed it for the relief of ships and shipwrecked seamen. Upon entering the lobby of Bamborough Castle, you are at once struck with the immense thickness of the old walls of the building, and with the ponderous preparations belonging to the institution for accidents by shipwreck, such as *screws* for raising vessels, great chains for mooring and lifting them, with blocks and tackle of enormous size, and of various kinds, to which Captain Manby's recent apparatus has very properly been added. There are also apartments with bedding &c. for the shipwrecked sailors; and store-houses for the reception of all kinds of mercantile goods. There are likewise certain regulations for firing a gun, setting off fire-rockets, and tolling a large bell in thick and foggy weather; and a patrol and watch are also understood to be kept up at the castle in certain states of the weather. But so great a change has taken place upon the coast, since this institution was founded, with regard to the establishment of better lighthouses every where, that comparatively few wrecks now take place upon this part of the coast. Indeed, if we take into account, the much greater extent of trade and shipping in the present day, we shall find, that what with the help of lighthouses and better surveys of the coast; together with the superior mode of rigging, and better management of ships, there are really fewer shipwrecks now than formerly; though vessels go to sea all the year round, instead of lying up during the winter months, the constant practice even so late as twenty or thirty years ago. Under these circumstances, it may readily be supposed, that the departments of this establishment intended for the prevention of shipwrecks, or the safety and comfort of the mariner, have now in a great measure become obsolete, and the good done by this *foundation*, is perhaps now chiefly confined to the education of 50 or 60 children, under the system of Dr Bell. As our time only admitted of a cursory view of the place, we walked round the exterior of the Castle, entering by the south-east gate, we left it by the *sally-port* towards the north-west; having only taken time to pass through the library and several apartments, to enjoy the extensive view from the top. The most curious part of the Castle is the well said to have been cut by the Romans through solid rock to the depth of 150 feet. This well, which was only discovered of late years in clearing away some rubbish, is shewn with four lighted candles stuck into a frame of wood, let down by a cord with a small windlass. The upper part of the rock on which the Castle is

built appears to be greenstone or whinstone, resting upon a bed of sandstone, in which the water is in all probability found. The lowering of the candles into this abyss, and the shade of the light glistening on its rugged sides, have a very curious and striking effect. Towards the sea this building has an extensive and castellated appearance. Upon the land side, the rock is still more precipitous and rugged, and has a much more picturesque and beautiful effect than to seaward. In returning to the ship, the conversation turned upon the probable effects of this charity, especially on the frugal and industrious habits of the people of the neighbouring village of Bamborough. But this would lead me too far from my subject; and I shall therefore close the observations of this day, by telling you that the farthest object which could be descried from the ship as the day began to close, was the little island of Coquet, situated on the Northumberland coast. I am, &c. S.



Bamburgh Castle from an 1832 engraving