

Get away for... **THE WEEKEND!**

Known for its Roman highlights, Haltwhistle proves to be a scenic detour through the north of England

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki

I like to think we were greeted at Herding Hill campsite by the flock of curious hens scratching the earth and some playful shaggy goats, but in truth the animals hardly glanced up as we parked our silver campervan by reception. Nevertheless, I leant on the fence to say hello to the animals before booking in.

The welcome in reception was warmer and we were soon reversing the 'van onto a large hedged pitch. We felt lucky, we had driven here in dreary rain but now low winter sun was streaming across the site.

Herding Hill Farm sits in a hollow between the 73-mile-long (80 Roman miles) Hadrian's Wall and the market town of Haltwhistle. It is uphill to the former and steeply downhill to the latter. Rural, but well connected, a handy year-round bus stops at the campsite gate every couple of hours.

Keen to make the most of the hours of daylight, we togged up for a walk. Distracted by Herding Hill Farm's other animals, I visited the two hairy pigs and a collection of alpacas, ponies and a donkey.

The alpacas and ponies wandered over hopeful for food but the donkey, always my favourite, had taken on board the full Eeyore demeanour and ignored my overtures of friendship. I would have persisted but Anthony reminded me about our walking plan and we set off towards the old frontier of the Roman Empire.

Country lanes took us towards Cawfields and Milecastle 42. These milecastles or fortlets were built every Roman mile to defend a gate in Hadrian's Wall and manage crossings. The 80 milecastles along Hadrian's Wall varied in size and are thought to have been the base for small groups of auxiliary soldiers. ▶

Why?... Hadrian's Wall is a UNESCO World Heritage Site

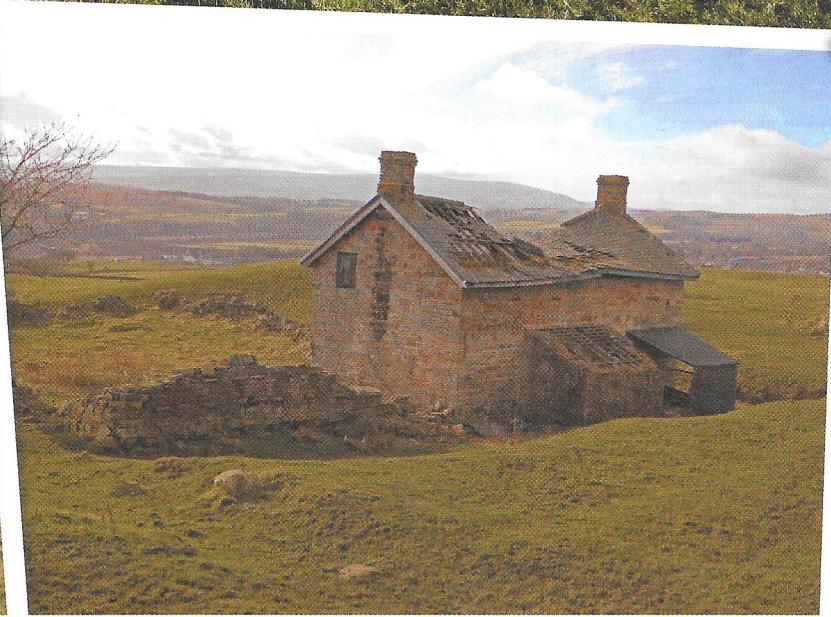
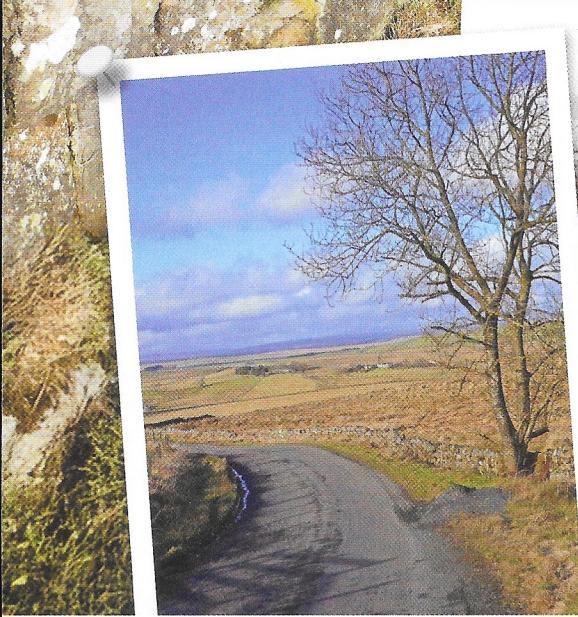


MAIN The line of Hadrian's Wall creeping across the landscape

FAR LEFT The pool at the former quarry at Cawfields

BELOW LEFT Looking north from Hadrian's Wall

BELOW RIGHT An abandoned farmhouse above Haltwhistle



ABOUT US...



US Carol Kubicki and her husband, Anthony, explore beautiful places in their Blue Bus whatever the season. Carol is a keen walker, fair-weather cyclist and improving birdwatcher

OUR 'VAN A 2021 Devon Firefly on a Ford Custom Transit SWB 2.0-litre. This is our third Devon Conversions campervan and we love the layout that packs so much into a sub-five-metre van

The sun cast a golden glow across the moorland as we left the asphalt path and picked up a grassy path leading towards the ruins of the milecastle. Crossing the Vallum, the defensive Roman ditch and mounds running south of the wall, the going became muddy and we were soon hopping between submerged stones and clumps of rushes to keep our feet dry.

Milecastle 42 was built on a steep, south-facing slope and overlooking Hole Gap, an area of vulnerable flat ground. Only a few courses of stones remain, but the rounded corners and the wide gateway gave us a feel for the fortification.

I stood on the ridge at the milecastle, Hadrian's Wall advancing along the bumps and dips of the landscape. The breeze on my face, I felt a connection with the thousands of auxiliary soldiers who defended this border through the 300 years it was in active use.

Unlike legionnaires, who were Roman citizens, the auxiliaries were non-citizen units recruited from groups of warriors around the Empire. Anthony laughed as I told him I was convinced one of these second-class soldiers was a distant

ancestor; if only I could be bothered to do a DNA test I might have proof!

Heading back to our campervan, we were unable to resist the pull of a cosy pub for a swift half. The Milecastle Inn, just half a mile from our campsite, had both a warming fire and good beer.

However, we paid the price for getting sidetracked; leaving the warmth of the pub, we could see dark clouds heading our way. We walked faster but couldn't outpace the rain clouds and a heavy shower quickly soaked us through. Back at our silver machine, the heating and kettle were soon on.

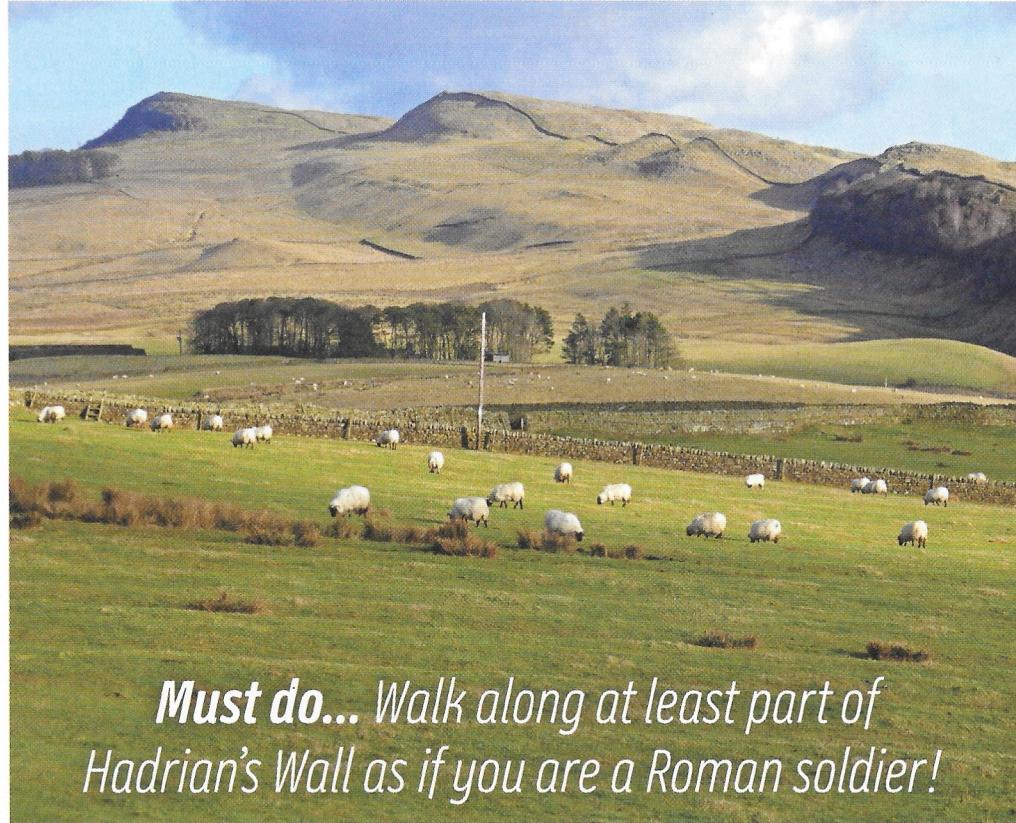
My wake-up call was the braying of the donkey the next morning; Eeyore was enthusiastically greeting the sunshine of a winter-spring day. It was the perfect weather for a countryside walk with spring promise.

We took paths across fields to the wooded gorge around Haltwhistle Burn, negotiating the steep and uneven steps down to the stream. In May this steep-sided gulley would be the archetypal spring woodland with bluebells blooming, their sweet scent filling the air.

INFORMATION

The AD122 Hadrian's Wall bus stops at Herding Hill Farm campsite and connects Haltwhistle with the main forts and other locations along Hadrian's Wall
W gonortheast.co.uk

Information about Northumberland National Park and Hadrian's Wall
W northumberlandnationalpark.org.uk
W hadrianswallcountry.co.uk



Must do... Walk along at least part of Hadrian's Wall as if you are a Roman soldier!

We spotted remnants of quarries in the gorge and, as we reached the outskirts of Haltwhistle, former industrial buildings and a tall chimney were evident by the well-used path. A brickworks, woollen mills and a coal mine once filled this valley and we followed the track bed of a narrow-gauge railway that carried stone from the Cawfields quarry to Haltwhistle.

In the past this English-Scottish borderland was menaced by gangs of household-raiding robbers. Border inhabitants protected themselves by fortifying their farmhouses, known as bastles and pele towers.

In Haltwhistle, many survive and can be found along the Bastle Trail. We picked up this trail in the town, reading the plaques telling the history of each bastle. Haltwhistle also claims to be the geographic centre of Britain and we found the prominent Centre of Britain Hotel, previously a fifteenth century pele tower.

We had coffee in a welcoming café that appeared to be the buzzing centre of Haltwhistle's daytime social scene before leaving the town via the thirteenth century parish church. This was open and we

peered in to see the wide central aisle and stained glass.

A ginnel led us behind buildings to a grassy path just in time to spot a couple of deer elegantly leaping over the fences. Stone cottages above us had long gardens down to the path, one packed with naturalised cheerful snowdrops.

Climbing above Haltwhistle through fields dotted with isolated farmhouses, we negotiated a number of steep wooden stiles over the dry stone walls. We came to an abandoned farmhouse, its tiled roof sinking between the two end chimneys and its former garden surrounded by a tumbledown wall.

At Shield on the Wall we returned to Hadrian's Wall near Milecastle 41. The regular facing stones hugging the ups and downs of the landscape are a masterpiece of both construction and art. Marching like Roman soldiers alongside the wall, we passed Milecastle 42 again and carried on to the former quarry at Cawfields. This is now a picnic spot with a pool overlooked by the sheer quarry wall.

We stayed with the wall to the site of Aesica fort. Here, I was once again ➤

ESSENTIALS

HOW LONG

Three nights

WHEN

Beat the crowds by visiting out of season

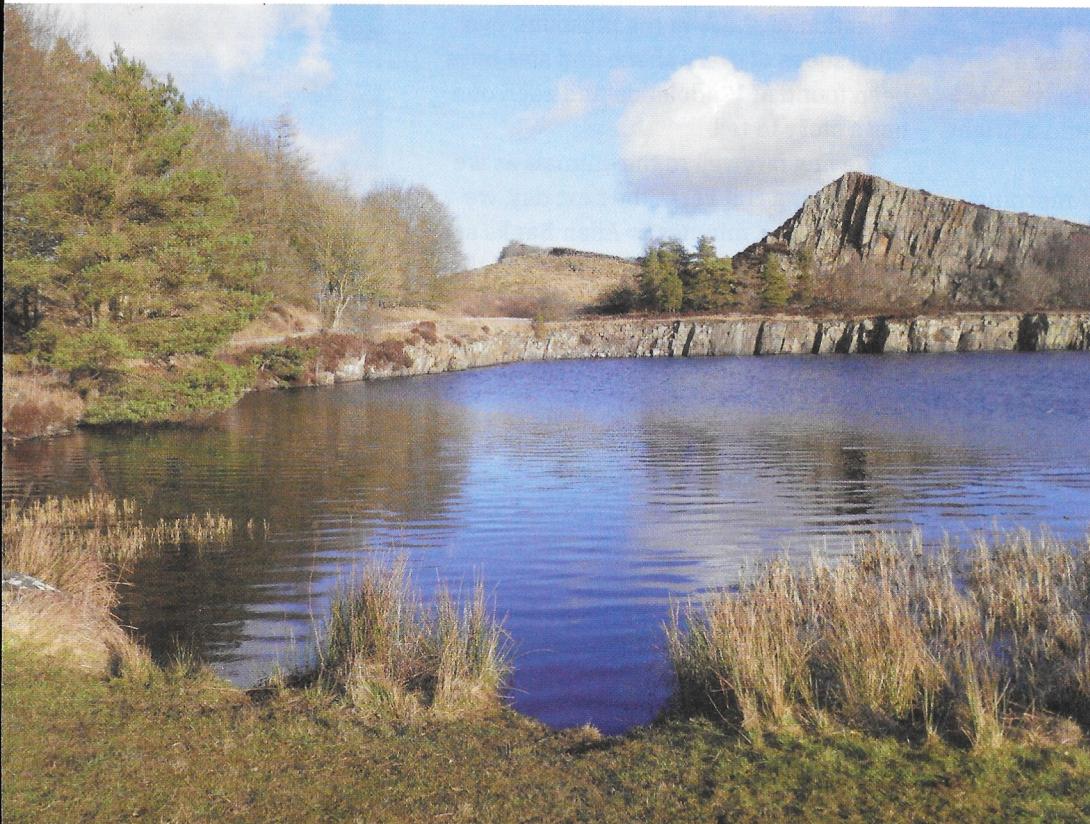
HOW MUCH

Fuel Average 40mpg (from Morecambe to Haltwhistle return 189 miles).....	£26
Site fees.....	£72
Entrance fee (Vindolanda Fort reduced access).....	£10
Parking: The Sill and Allen Banks and Staward Gorge (National Trust members free at the latter).....	£5
Total	£113



BELOW FAR LEFT The Centre of Britain Hotel in Haltwhistle is a former defensive pele tower; Hadrian's Wall is a masterpiece of both art and construction

BELOW The pool at the former quarry at Cawfields; Snowdrops in Haltwhistle

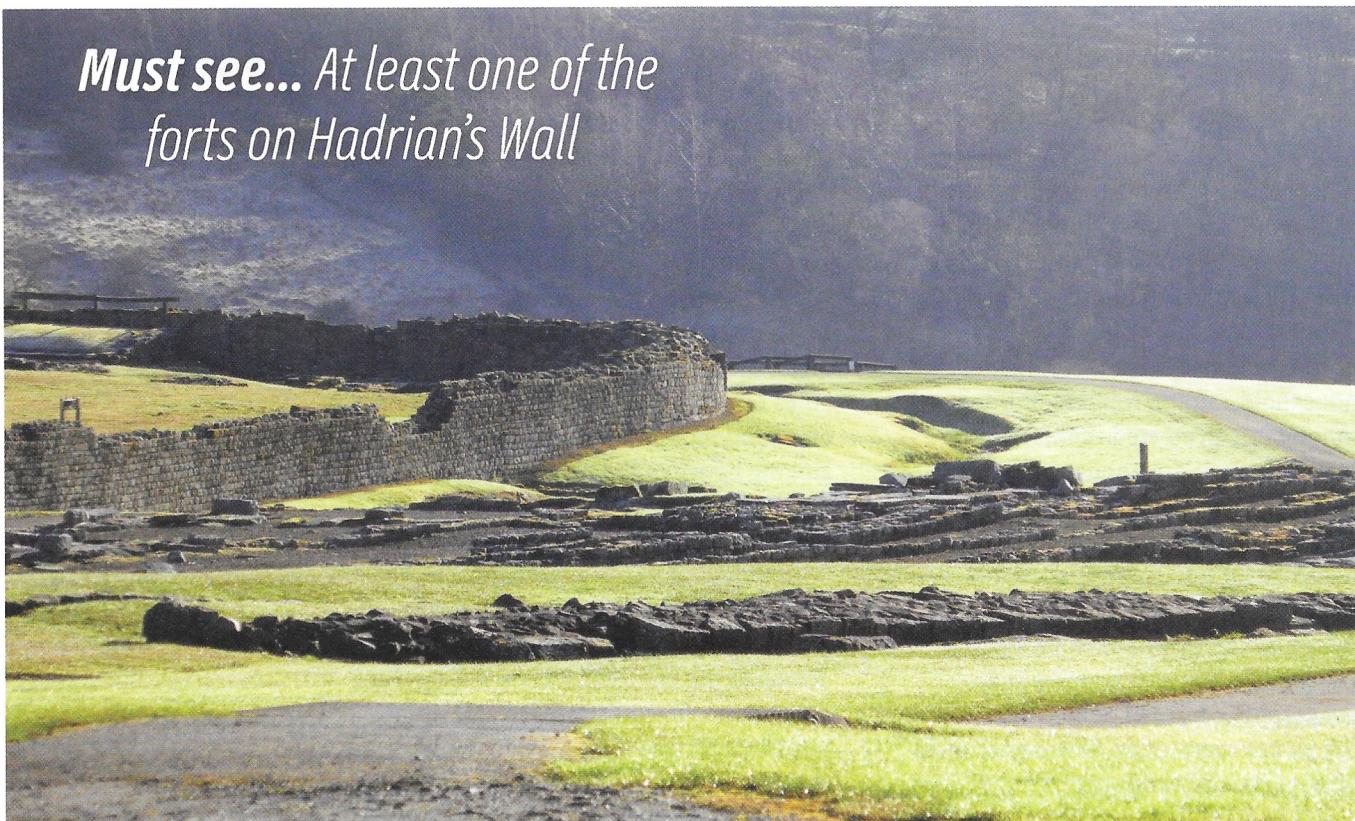


TOP TIPS

The access to the car park for Allen Banks and Staward Gorge has a bridge under the railway line with a height limit of 3.35m (11 feet)

As well as Vindolanda Fort, Housesteads Roman Fort is open every day in winter. Check opening times for Birdoswald and Chesters forts

Must see... At least one of the forts on Hadrian's Wall



standing in the shoes of those soldiers as I took in the panoramic views, the North Pennines to the south, the edges of Kielder Forest in the north and the line of Hadrian's Wall across the landscape.

That night we stood outside the 'van wrapped up against the chill under a cloudless sky. Multitudes of stars twinkled in recognisable constellations and a bright moon lit the dark campsite.

We had a slow start the next morning as the sun melted the frost on the 'van, eventually driving the short distance to Once Brewed and The Sill National Landscape Discovery Centre. This new modern building is welcoming and combines exhibition spaces, a shop and café with a youth hostel.

We reminisced about our stay at the old hostel in 1999 during a stormy cycling trip along Hadrian's Wall while mooching happily around an exhibition of poetry and wildlife illustrations and playing on the interactive displays in the landscape exhibition. The light and airy café served us good coffee along with a view to Hadrian's Wall.

We have visited the Roman forts on previous holidays and each one has added

a bit more to my understanding of the history and use of Hadrian's Wall, but, as we were so close, we decided to revisit Vindolanda Fort. From our 1999 visit I remember the rain and the impressive collection of shoes in the museum; over 5,000 shoes of every shape and size have been found at Vindolanda and each one has a story to tell.

Waving farewell to the animals as we left Herding Hill Farm the next day, we drove the ten minutes to Allen Banks and Staward Gorge, a National Trust site that was once part of Ridley Hall. We chose the circular walk to Morralee Wood and tarn, first crossing the tree-lined River Allen and then climbing steadily upwards through woodland dotted with crags. Sheltered in a hollow among tall larch trees we found Morralee Tarn and felt lucky to have it to ourselves. The water was covered in polished thin ice and the sun spilled over the trees, illuminating their crowns in golden yellow light. The waymarkers led us back to the 'van in the sunny walled garden where we made hot drinks and lunch before hitting the road home, feeling refreshed after a spell of forest bathing. **mmm**



ABOVE Part of the extensive mosaic of excavated buildings at Vindolanda; We climbed over lots of stiles as we ascended above Haltwhistle; The donkey at Herding Hill Farm Camping and Glamping Site

THE CAMP SITE

Herding Hill Farm Camping and Glamping Site, Shield Hill, Haltwhistle NE49 9NW
Open all year

W herdinghillfarm.co.uk
T 01434 320175