

BORDERS OF HISTORY

Distracted by the Highlands since childhood, Paul Lamarra rediscovers the turbulent history and furtive landscape of the Scottish Borders on a hike of the Borders Abbeys Way.

The soft, rounded hills of the Scottish Borders are an ideal training ground for the aspirant walker. Navigational errors are unlikely to result in death and humanity is never very far away.

It was in the Borders hills that I cut my hill-walking teeth. But the initial thrill of fording the River Tweed and camping in a lonely glen on a first overnight hike unfortunately wore off. Indeed, I can remember the exact moment.

At the age of 15 I undertook to walk the West Highland Way. En route I encountered Glencoe and all its grandeur and palpable dangers. My head was turned, I am sorry to say, and for many years to come.

I have however renounced this hubris and once again come to revel in the Borders hills. What the Borders lacks in drama it certainly makes up for in interest and intimacy. The carefree walking in a landscape on the comfortable side of wild allows for trips where the act of walking isn't an end in itself.

CROSS-BORDER WANDERERS

As a callow youth, I couldn't see the thick layer of history that coats this landscape. But now, for me there

Striding across the cloisters
in the grounds of Melrose Abbey.



are few greater pleasures than to scuff away at it and make the connection with bygone travellers.

Most travellers in the Border hills and glens have left their mark. The Romans, as we all know, were very organised about that kind of thing and all Roman roads in Scotland were measured from their largest fort built in the shadow of the Eildon Hills, near Melrose. In contrast, there are the informal wanderings of monks between the four Borders abbeys carrying news of a new abbot or an impending plague. The drove roads across the open hills along which cattle were driven to southern markets remain as obvious tracks. As are the getaway routes of the 15th- and 16th-century cross-border cattle rustlers known as reivers.

The wandering minstrels, whose campfire stories and ballads bring to life the exploits of all of these Border travellers, provide the thread of continuity. And it was Sir Walter Scott, who had his home in the Borders, who explored every valley on horseback and on foot, diligently recording this rich oral tradition.

It was this long history of itinerancy that inspired the Border Abbeys Way, a 109km/68-mile loop that links the ancient abbeys at Melrose, Dryburgh, Jedburgh and Kelso as well as the towns of Selkirk and Hawick. The

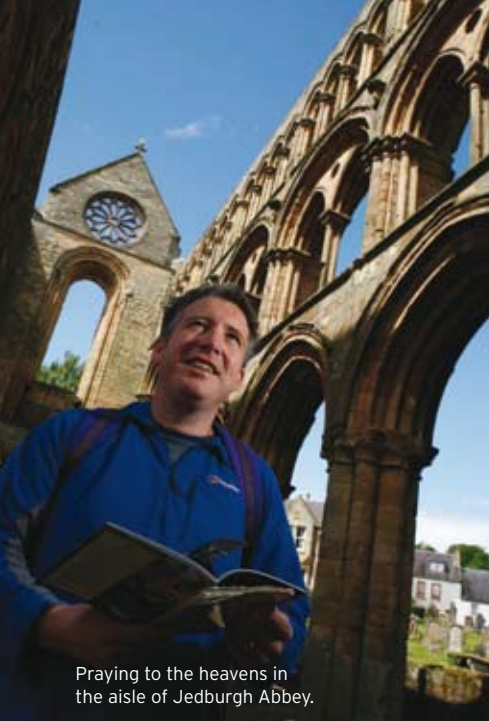
way not only seeks to exploit the compelling link between landscape and the area's history to attract visitors, but it also aims to reinvigorate the ancient byways with increased everyday use by local people walking between the main towns.

Created by the Scottish Borders Council and Visit Scottish Borders, it is a kite-shaped loop with two long sections following the rivers Tweed and Teviot and two shorter upland sections. It can be started anywhere but I chose to begin at the guidebook's starting point in Jedburgh and go as suggested in a clockwise direction.

ROMAN AND ENGLISH INVADERS

Jedburgh is a quiet town now, but from the 13th century to the 16th century it was a frontier town in an almost perpetual state of recovery, lying less than 16km/10 miles from the tense border with England. The abbey stands by Jed Water, roofless and picked back to its fine stone bones by invading English armies, rather like a half-demolished Sarajevo tower block, a testament to indiscriminate warfare.

On the climb out of Jedburgh it is clear that times were not always bad. Placed at the top of the food chain by King David I, the Augustinian monks imported from



Praying to the heavens in the aisle of Jedburgh Abbey.



Dryburgh - the most Romantic of the Borders abbeys.

France to found the abbey in the 12th century had their pick of the best land available - and they chose well.

The surrounding countryside is the picture of health and wealth. In distant fields the inordinate depth of the grass was still apparent as the wind rippled through it in great arcs. In fields closer to hand the very contented livestock appeared short or even legless as they failed to munch faster than the grass was growing. Judging by the number of substantial farmhouses discretely placed among clumps of stately trees, the gentleman farmer has replaced the well-fed monk.

The Borders are much drier than the rest of Scotland and underfoot it was mud-free, with the firm grassy surface cushioning every step. Once over the high-point at just over 300m/1000ft, the pink sandstone tower of the church at Bedrule was in my sights. The very name Bedrule has an ancient resonance and its long history of human occupation is undoubtedly down to the comfortable beauty of the tree-filled valley in which the hamlet sits.

Over the millennia the population has however oscillated between the valley and the summit of Rubers Law. Uncharacteristically craggy, this volcanic cone has been a refuge since the Bronze Age. The Romans later occupied the Bronze Age fort for use as a signal station, and in the 17th century Covenanters - feral Christians who were persecuted for defying the king - regarded it as a safer place to hold their religious services.

From Bedrule it was a short walk to the pretty village of Denholm, and from there it was not far along the banks of the River Teviot to Hawick. In contrast to other long-distance footpaths in Scotland, there are no long, lonely sections on the Borders Abbeys Way. Instead, the



'Like a half-demolished Sarajevo tower block' - Jedburgh's ruins.

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Calling in to see Sir Walter Scott at Abbotsford House.



Mooching around Melrose.

route makes a conscious effort to visit rather than avoid towns and villages. In this regard the Abbeys Way feels like a holiday rather than a challenge, similar to the experience of walking in the Dordogne or Tuscany and almost certainly what the planners had in mind.

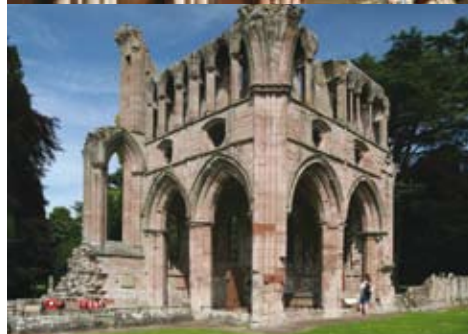
CATTLE SMUGGLING HILLS

It was the route from Hawick to Selkirk and on to Melrose that I considered to be the highlight of the Abbeys Way. Crossing high and open ground, it takes up the route of the Thief Road to Selkirk, and then an old drove road over to Melrose in the Tweed valley. Drovers and reivers each had their own reasons for choosing to avoid the sheltered river valleys.

On the Thief Road it is easy to appreciate why the reivers were so successful in their illegal cross-border trade. From the high ground between Ashkirk and Selkirk the views south were of a vast and anonymous country free of obvious landmarks. It is a landscape of countless hills of similar height, whose convex slopes knit together to form hidden dells into which an army of thieves and a hundred head of cattle could disappear. It is a landscape in which the knowledgeable reiver always had the advantage and pursuers would invariably retreat for fear of ambush.

Taking cattle from as far north as the Clyde Valley, and frequently burning down farms in the process, the reivers headed south in the dead of night into the badlands of Liddesdale, Eskdale and the Cheviots, and over the border to where the march wardens couldn't follow. It was only with the union of the crowns in the 17th century that the reivers' trade was finally ended.

At several points on the way the route crosses delightful shin-deep meadows peppered with bog cotton and buttercups. However, in the final mile into Selkirk there is a meadow that is quite special. Pink wild thyme, yellow pansies, grass of a purple hue, more buttercups and devil's-bit gave off colour in a blaze. I was led through on the grassy track by



THE ABBEYS

JEDBURGH King David I of Scotland invited Augustinian monks to found an abbey here in 1138. It took over century to build and was then subjected to attack with tiresome regularity, besieged at least four times during the 15th century and fortified by English and then French troops in the 16th century.

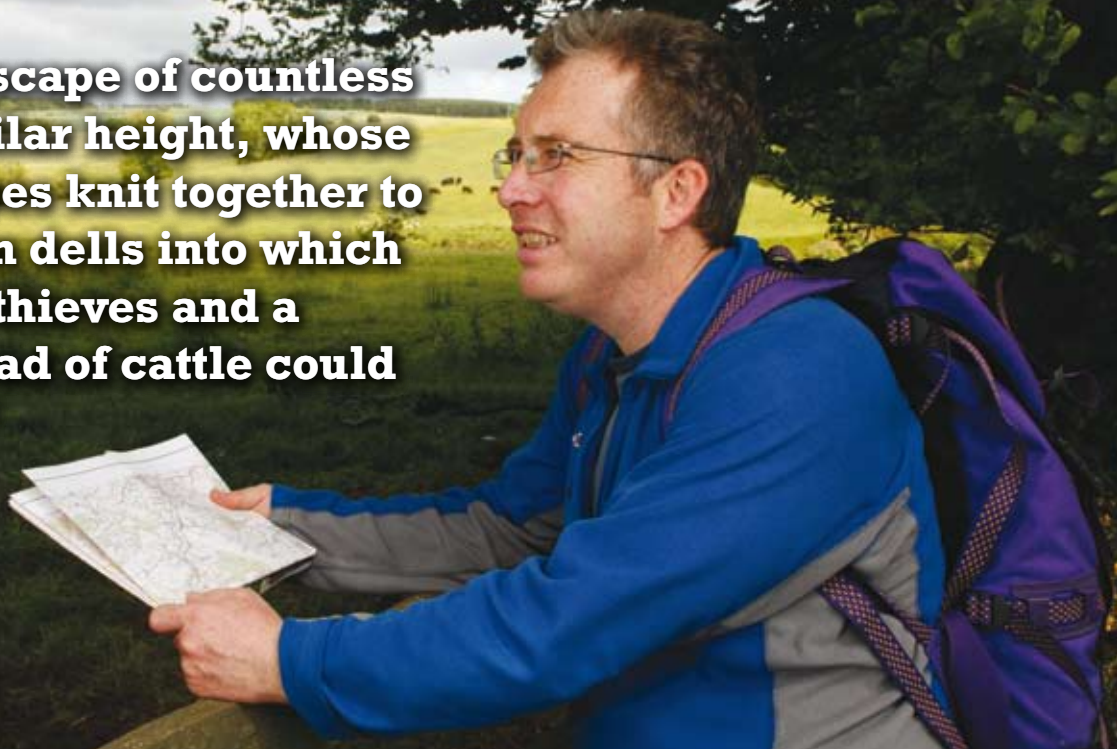
MELROSE Also founded by David I in 1136 for the Cistercian Order, the ruins by the River Tweed are the most complete. Again subject to many attacks, its demise was complete during the Rough Wooing (1544-1551) when Henry VIII tried to force a marriage between his son Edward and the infant Mary Queen of Scots with a number of invasions.

DRYBURGH Founded in the 12th century by Premonstratensians monks from the north of England, it's regarded as the most Romantic of the abbeys. The scorch marks and cracking under the rose window date from Edward III's Burnt Candlemas of 1355. Sir Walter Scott and the earl Haig are buried here.

KELSO Founded in 1128 by Tironensians monks from France, it may have been the biggest of the four abbeys. Particularly badly damaged by repeated English attacks, only a small but impressive portion remains. King James III of Scotland's coronation was held here in 1460.

Visit www.historic-scotland.gov.uk for further details.

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Looking out over bandit country.

FOUR MORE HISTORIC PATHS

HADRIAN'S WALL PATH, 135km/84 miles. One of the world's finest historic monuments is never more than a few feet away as you walk with the 2nd-century Roman wall from Wallsend to Bowness. Highlights include the Roman forts of Vindolanda and Housesteads. www.nationaltrail.co.uk/hadrianswall

OFFA'S DYKE PATH, 283km/177 miles. For 128km/80 miles the path follows the 8th-century earthwork wall that marks out the English-Welsh border. www.offasdyke.co.uk

RIDGEWAY, 137km/85 miles. Follows Britain's oldest road through the Chilterns. The road has been used by armies, shepherds and travellers since prehistoric times. www.nationaltrail.co.uk/ridgeway

COPPER TRAIL, 100km/60 miles. A circular walk of Bodmin Moor including King Doniert's standing stones, prehistoric dolmen and old copper mines. www.coppertrail.co.uk

two brown hares and kept on the path by an anxious lapwing wheeling overhead.

It is the kind of place in the lee of the old stone dovecot that I imagine travelling minstrels regularly gathered in relative comfort to tell their campfire tales of gaol breaks, lucky escapes from the gallows, revenge meted out to the warden of the marches or the death of an evil magician.

SCOTT'S MUDDLED LEGACY

On the far side of Selkirk, the way resumes and follows an old drove road between clumps of yellow broom. Although legal traders in cattle, the drovers often stuck to the high ground to avoid paying road tolls. The drove road descends towards Abbotsford, home of the 19th-century novelist Sir Walter Scott. Scott was the Borders' greatest advocate, but somewhere along the line he inadvertently established the Romantic figure of a tartan-clad Highland warrior as the true embodiment of Scotland and its past. Since then it has been a struggle for any other part of Scotland to compete with what has become a very powerful Highland brand.

It is a problem that exercises Keith Robeson, senior ranger at Scottish Borders council: "As a walking destination we feel that the Borders is as good as any, but we do still struggle to convince people that we are as much a part of Scotland as the Highlands and islands."

Although I too succumbed to the Highlands, I feel that the many who dash north in search of Brigadoon or Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* would feel at least as satisfied by the Borders Abbeys Way. So much of Scottish history is about its relationship with England and nowhere is this more apparent than in the Borders abbeys. Buried at Melrose abbey is a casket, which is believed to contain

the heart of Robert the Bruce, king of Scotland and the hero of the battle of Bannockburn. Melrose, Dryburgh and Kelso abbeys, like Jedburgh, all bear the scars of the Wars of Independence. At Dryburgh abbey-church the stones beneath the great window remain cracked and blackened from Edward III's Burnt Candlemas. Henry VIII's Rough Wooing finally did for them all.

Despite this bloody history, it was easy while walking by the River Tweed to slip into the contemplative calm I imagine attracted the monks and abbots in the 12th century. For calm and beauty the Borders Abbeys Way does have rivals. But for an authentic walk through history, it has very few. ■



WALK IT!

TIME/DISTANCE: Allow 5-6 days to complete the 109km/68-mile loop. The official guide suggests several itineraries up to 11 days.

MAPS: Landranger 73, 74, 79, 80; Explorer 331, 338, 339, 0L16.

TRAVEL TO: The most convenient mainline station is Edinburgh Waverley (☎ 08457 484 950 www.nationalrail.co.uk) where you can transfer to St Andrews bus station for the 95 bus to Selkirk, Ashkirk or Hawick. For Jedburgh or Kelso change at Hawick to bus service 20 (☎ 0870 608 2608 www.travelinescotland.com).

TRAVEL AROUND: The 95, 20 and 67 buses link the Way and nearby towns (☎ 0870 608 2068 www.travelinescotland.com).

GUIDE: Visit Scottish Borders produces an excellent guide with maps, priced £2, available from local TICs.

FURTHER INFO: www.scotborders.gov.uk/bordersabbesway www.bordersabbesway.co.uk, www.visitscottishborders.com