

SCA Spring Castles Tour – Carlisle & the Debatable Lands

Friday 17th – Sunday 19th April 2026

For our 2026 Spring tour longstanding SCA members Andy and Jan Ritchie arranged for us a superb itinerary of visits principally over Saturday and Sunday 18th & 19th April with, for those members able to partake, the extra bonus of two surprise pop up visits arranged also by them on the Friday.

Before setting out the weekend's events, because most of the properties visited were pele towers on the Anglo-Scottish border, the origin of the word pele in itself is quite interesting. It derives from the old French word piele and medieval English pel. Both these words stem from the Latin palus which means a stake. The term evolved in three distinct phases;

- ***The stake*** – early simple fortifications and fences were constructed from sharpened wooden stakes or piles
- ***The enclosure*** – these fenced in stockaded courtyards where villagers herded livestock to protect against cross border raiders were called peles
- ***The tower*** – over time when sturdy multi-storey stone towers were built to watch for danger or serve as a secure refuge, they were constructed in the corner of or inside these pele enclosures. Eventually, the name of the outer stockade (the pele) transferred to the tower itself.

The first of the pop-up visits was to **LOCHHOUSE TOWER**

a gem of a pele tower owned by and superbly refurbished by Andy and Jan - now used as holiday accommodation. Our host very kindly facilitated the visit by foregoing bookings during the weekend so that we could enjoy. The present tower dates from 1536 but is believed to be on the site of a much earlier tower. Originally surrounded by a loch, this became overgrown, but after undertaking their refurbishment following acquisition the loch is now restored. The unusual features of the tower are its rounded angles and indented upper floor where the wall thickness lessens. In this lovely now peaceful spot, it is difficult to imagine the turbulent times that the tower has gone through, particularly during the lawless era in the area associated with the border reivers. If a raiding gang at that time attacked your homestead and stole your livestock or killed your loved ones you were said to have been 'be-reived' (robbed of everything that you owned). It is believed this is where the term bereaved that we use today originates from.



Whilst enjoying a tour of the tower up to and including the wall walk, tea, coffee and biscuits were provided by our hosts.

From here we were privileged to go to the next ‘pop up’ - **ELSHIESHIELDS TOWER** a wonderful 16th century L plan tower house with early 18th century five bay house, the whole being harled and with red ashlar dressings. The tower is now the home of our host Ann Shukman who we were privileged to meet - a fascinating woman who graduated in Modern Languages from Cambridge and gained a doctorate in Russian Literary Theory from Oxford. Ann was one of the first women to be ordained into the Church of England in 1994. She moved to Scotland in 2000 and has become passionate about Scottish culture and church history. Access was given to us into the original tower where it was possible to go out on to the watch turret erected on the westerly gable – as there was a considerable degree of contortion required to do so, only a few ventured out. Our host had arranged refreshments of tea, coffee, cakes and biscuits in the barn and we were allowed to visit parts of the 18th century house, mainly the drawing room and dining room as well as other sections of the private quarters – a real privilege.



Following the visit to Elshieshields we made our individual ways to our base for the weekend, **GRETNA HALL** Hotel. Built in 1710, it is the oldest building in Gretna Green and was originally built as a private manor for the Johnstone Family. Over the years it evolved into a coaching inn and became a world-famous wedding venue for affluent elopees seeking to bypass strict English marriage laws. The hotel has its fair share of ghost stories, the most famous of which

is the ‘Crying Woman’ a spirit said to be the ghost of a bride from the 1830s whose furious father tracked her down and shot her groom dead before dragging her back to England. Happily, we did not encounter any ghosts during our stay and enjoyed excellent hospitality from attentive staff. Evening meals on the Friday were taken individually as SCA members began to arrive for the weekend. Most guests retired early for the night ready for the weekend ahead.

After breakfast on Saturday, the full tour began with our coach arriving in front of the hotel for us to leave promptly at 9.00 am for the day’s adventures.

Our first visit was to Burgh by Sands situated near the Solway Firth. Here our destination was to **ST. MICHAEL’S 12TH CENTURY NORMAN CHURCH** built with stones from Hadrian’s Wall and the Roman fort of Aballava on the site of which the church now stands. This is the place where King Edward I (Longshanks) was laid in state following his death at the age of 68 when he passed away in his tent from dysentery whilst on a military campaign to suppress a Scottish uprising led by Robert the Bruce. According to medieval accounts Edward made a bizarre dying request in that he demanded his heart be taken to the Holy Land and that his bones be boiled, kept with the army and carried into battle in Scotland until the nation was fully conquered. This request was ignored however by his son Edward II and his father’s body was transported south for a formal burial at Westminster Abbey. Following dangerous times during the reign of Edward II, the west tower of the church was built (1360) to provide refuge and many of the architectural features from that time are visible within the church today including the apertures used to



reinforce the entrance using strong pieces of oak; arrow slits and the very heavy iron gate at the entrance to the tower. A fascinating feature as one walks down the church path is a timeline of stones commemorating the area's history from the building of Hadrian's Wall to the present day.

From here we moved on a short distance to **DRUMBURGH CASTLE** in close proximity to the village of Burgh. A pele tower was originally built on this site by Robert le Brun in 1307 on the site of a former tower that had been part of Hadrian's Wall. The property was then rebuilt in 1518 by Thomas Dacre as a house of strength and in 1678 and 1681 John Algionby altered and built the property as we see it today. The first-floor doorway with staircase are later additions and above the doorway are the Dacre coat of arms. Also incorporated within part of the stonework are parts of a Roman shrine. The property is privately owned today by the Hodgson Family who operate in this area as Drumburgh Castle Farm. We met with members of the family who gave us a potted history of the building and a little insight into their farming operations as well.



Our next visit was to **THISTLEWOOD TOWER** in the village of Ivegill. Situated in close proximity to Southwaite Services on the M6 motorway this is a rectangular tower of two storeys over basement with lower two storey four bay extension. The original tower house which is Grade 1 listed dates from the 14th century with the adjoining 16th century house. It is privately owned and we were given the privilege of being shown round in small groups by the very proud present owners who have meticulously and sensitively curated the property with tasteful modern additions.



For our fourth visit of the day, we only had a short distance to travel to **ROSE CASTLE** a former palace of the bishops of Carlisle from 1230 until 2009. When the Church Commissioners sold the property in 2016 it was purchased by John and Sarah Snyder who launched the Rose Castle Company and undertook extensive renovations to preserve its historic character while updating it for modern use. Originally established in 1133 by King Henry I the diocese became over the years one of the largest English dioceses incorporating Lancashire North of the Sands and the entirety of Cumberland and Westmorland.



The Rose Castle Foundation founded by Sarah Snyder in 2014 builds on the work of the Cambridge Interfaith Programme. Sarah's vision is one of using Rose Castle - itself a witness to border warfare and conflict - as a safe place to bring people of opposing views from all parts of the world together to learn better how to 'disagree well'. The castle is not normally open to the general public, and we were therefore privileged to have the opportunity to be shown round as well as this being our venue for lunch where we were given an offering of soup, a selection

of sandwiches and tea and coffee. The oldest part of the castle is now the Strickland Tower dating from the 14th century - the tower measures 29 feet square with a basement chamber below which was thought to have served as a prison. Above were two principal rooms – one on each floor with roof space and access to the parapet. During the Civil War Rose Castle was attacked and badly damaged and in 1648 Strickland Tower was ruined along with much of the rest of the castle. The tower was left standing roofless and for almost a century it remained in this state. In the 18th century under Bishop Charles Lyttelton the tower was restored with the walls being raised to full height and a pyramidal roof of blue slate being added. The tower as we know it today however stems from a further and fuller restoration in 1852 by Anthony Salvin, one of the leading architects of the Gothic Revival. At that time battlements, a roof and turret were added.



Fully refreshed from lunch we left for our fifth visit of the day to **WETHERALL PRIORY GATE HOUSE** a miniature 15th century pele tower containing two storeys of what are described as comfortable rooms, and it later became a fortified vicarage as a defence against border raiders. The gate house is the sole survivor of a small Benedictine priory. The priory was an important place of sanctuary in the border region and within an area bounded by small stone crosses wrongdoers could claim freedom from arrest. They were then obliged to toll a bell in the church and to swear to keep the peace before the Bailiff of the Manor. In 1342 Edward III offered a pardon to those claiming sanctuary here on condition that they fought for him against the Scots.



Our next visit along pleasant country roads and rolling hills took us to **LANERCOST PRIORY** within sight of Naworth Castle which Andy and Jan had hoped could have been incorporated within our visit but on the particular weekend in question the Howard family owners could not accommodate. Founded in 1169 the extensive remains of the medieval monastic site were worthy of a visit. Originally it housed a community of Augustinian canons and later became home to a branch of the Dacre family. The priory was dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene whose statue adorns the west front of the church. At some point it acquired a relic, said to be a piece of the belt or girdle of St. Mary Magdalene which would have attracted pilgrims. Over five months in 1306 – 1307 Lanercost temporarily became a royal residence and the centre of national affairs. The elderly and then unwell Edward I could no longer lead his army against the Scots but was following them closely. In September 1306, unable to ride, he was carried on a litter from Newcastle intending to hold a Parliament at Carlisle. However, resting at Lanercost he became gravely ill and was forced to withdraw to the priory. Much of the stone used for the construction of Lanercost Priory came also from Hadrian's Wall. Adjoining the priory is Dacre tower (also known as Priors Tower) and the adjoining Dacre Hall. Today Dacre Hall is preserved as a village hall and reputed to be the oldest in England.



After travelling through the northerly parts of Cumbria our next visit only a short distance from Lanercost took us into Northumberland to **BIRDOSWOLD ROMAN FORT** which sits on the longest continuous stretch of Hadrian's Wall. The spectacularly situated remains of the Roman Fort were begun shortly after the building of Hadrian's Wall in AD 122. It was garrisoned by an infantry of over 800 men and remained in occupation throughout the Roman period. The defences are the best preserved along the whole of Hadrian's Wall. The fort was reoccupied in the Middle Ages and was the target of raids by border reivers in the 16th century. By that time the west gate of the fort had collapsed and a typical border bastle house was built within the walls of the Roman fort. The farmhouse which houses the museum was built in 1858 and includes a mock medieval pele tower. The interior now houses the museum giving a fascinating insight into Roman life at the time.



The final visit of the day to **THIRLWALL CASTLE** was a relatively short distance away and here this 12th century castle situated on high ground within the Northumberland National Park is managed by the Park Authority and was the home of the Thirlwall Family. The estate passed to the Swinburne Family by marriage in 1738 and was subsequently sold to the Earl of Carlisle for £4,000 in 1748. Sadly, thereafter the castle fell into decay and in 1832 and then again in 1982 there were serious collapses of masonry. Once again much of the original structure was built using stones from nearby Hadrian's Wall. The name Thirlwall combines middle English thirl – a perforated/bored wall and a combination of wall i.e. Hadrian's Wall, situated nearby. It is said that King Edward I stopped off at the castle on his way to start a new invasion of Scotland.

Leaving Thirlwall Castle our next destination was back to Gretna Hall Hotel for our evening meal in a private suite where 33 of the weekend's attendees enjoyed a three-course meal with wine and attendant drinks.

A brief address with a vote of thanks to our wonderful organisers was given by our chair Dorothy. After the meal convivial conversations followed in the reception area and bars with some deciding to retire for the night ready for the following day's further adventures.



After breakfast on the Sunday once again our coach was waiting for us outside the hotel, this time with a different driver joining us from Cockermouth and one who was especially interested in the various places we visited in the day, the first of which was to **SCALEBY CASTLE** once again situated in Cumbria. This privately owned Grade I listed building and scheduled ancient monument is situated on low lying ground with no natural defences, however it was surrounded by a double moat, of which most of the outer 12 metre wide moat enclosing an area of 125 metres in diameter is complete. Traces still exist of the inner moat. This is a peaceful and secluded spot. Originally built in the 14th century, the property was altered and extended in the 15th, 16th, 17th, and 19th centuries. The tower in the northeast corner has the usual features of a pele tower including a vault at ground level and spiral staircase. The hall attached to the pele is also tunnel vaulted

which is rare in England although not of course in Scotland. Originally built by the Tilliol Family, it later passed to the Musgroves and the Gilpins, well known Cumbrian families. In the 19th and 20th centuries it was acquired by the Fawcett and Standish families and eventually sold to the Watt Family before the current owners Oliver Eden 8th Baron Henley (and Lady Henley) acquired the same. We were privileged to have an external viewing of the castle accompanied by Lord Henley. Fortunately for us the weather was fine and sunny, and we were able to walk through and enjoy the extensive gardens and grounds which are not normally open to the public. This is a place redolent with history and where the fine ashlar red sandstone masonry conjures up the grandeur of the past.



More time would have been welcome here but our next visit of the day to **ASKERTON CASTLE** was beckoning. Originally built around 1290, the original castle was an unfortified manor, but in the late 15th century Thomas Lord Dacre built two crenelated towers on either side of the hall range, ostensibly with the aim of increasing the living space in the property rather than simply for reasons of defence. It is believed that a third tower on the northwest corner of the property may have been built for defensive purposes, but this has since been lost. In the 1850s the castle was renovated by architect Anthony Salvin and the building that now exists is Grade I listed. Once again, the property is not open to the public, but we were given the privilege of not only visiting but were met by the current owners Jane Eden and Chris Evans who run an 1846-acre organic livestock farm which has been certified organic since September 2004 and Certified Pasture for Life since September 2019. One of the puzzling features here is the large triple window in the north wall. This is in a very exposed position and totally inappropriate for the early 16th century when this part of the castle was built – it could perhaps have been put there by Lord William Howard after the border fighting had died down having been taken from Kirkoswald Castle along with other parts of that building which he took to his principal home at the time of Naworth Castle, referred to earlier. Our host family were presented with a plaque and a copy of the journal



Our third visit of the day was to **BEWCASTLE AND CHURCH**. This is an isolated village steeped in both roman and border history. Here the church, the farm and the castle occupy the site of a roman outpost which guarded the Maiden Way, the main roman road north from Birdoswald on Hadrian's Wall, some 6 miles to the South. The castle was built following Cumberland's annexation from Scotland by King William II of England who built castles along the border to protect it. These were at Carlisle, Brough and Bewcastle. It was since 1066 when the Norman's landed that the adaptation of Roman Forts into castles was much favoured as they provided a ready supply of building stone. This was the case here at Bewcastle where there was a roman fort with a deep and wide ditch. The original castle was destroyed in 1173 and the castle that we see today was built between 1361 and 1371 by John de Strivelyn one of the King's Generals. It was originally 27 metres square with buildings on all but the west side grouped around a small courtyard. The original entrance stone carved with the de Strivelyn's coat of arms disappeared around 1823 and is now built into the wall of the barn at Demesne



Farm adjoining and it can still be seen today. In 1900 the castle was sold as part of Demesne Farm and in 1968 the castle itself was then sold on to a London property company with the intention of selling parts of it to Americans. This project failed and the castle continues sadly to decay with no one now running it. St. Cuthbert's Church here incorporates parts which date from 1277 notwithstanding that now it is mostly the Victorian alterations that endure. The church is Grade II* listed and within the churchyard is the magnificent 8th century Anglo Saxon Bewcastle Cross standing free in the churchyard. It is this that Nikolaus Pevsner described as one of the 12 most important monuments in Britain. The timing of our visit here could not have been better because as we arrived the congregation of the

church were just emerging from morning service and we were privileged to be given a fascinating expose of the cross and its significance by the Reverend Dr Robert Brown, Priest in Charge.



He was able to eloquently bring to life the significance of all the symbols that are carved into the cross and we all wished that we could have spent more time here as his explanations and insights were fascinating. On a personal note, I was able to have a word with him about

the previous rector here, Philip Greenhalgh who is a friend of mine going back to the 1960s. Within the grounds of the church there is a fascinating small museum and the interior of this is shown where can be seen an illustration of the cross in all its former glory. The cross as it stands today is shown above and on the left-hand side can be seen the current Priest in Charge. There is a fascinating road sign close to the church with the mileage to Rome.



Our fourth visit of the day was to **STONEGARTHSIDE HALL** an exceptionally remote Grade II listed country house in Nicholforest Cumbria situated just half a mile from the Scottish border. It is often described as England's most remote country house built in the Scottish Baronial style and dating back to the late 13th century. It was originally a fortified pele tower serving as a stronghold during the turbulent era of the border reivers. It is here on the edge of the Kershope Forest that the historically disputed territories once known as the Debatable Lands

lie. It was previously let to the Vivat Trust which managed it as a holiday rental until going into liquidation in 2015. This was the traditional home of the forresters of Nicholforest from before 1580 on to around 1760. It was then sold to the Holme Family. The building has crow step gables, ashlar chimney stacks and a graduated Welsh slate roof. It is three storeys high

and has numerous bays. The external walls of the existing building are 4 ft thick; there are dressed stones from an older building built into the walls with a dungeon and massive staircase still existing. The property is currently undergoing renovation, however, and in respect of the upper floors some parts are currently unsafe and with a resident bat colony.

Our next visit and our lunch stop was to **NETHERBY HALL**. Here halls, living quarters and gardens now sit astride what was at its height a major military outpost for the Romans secure behind the massive wall built by the Emperor Hadrian. For almost 300 years it is likely that the fort played a major role in keeping the northern tribes at bay. Now owned by Gerald and Margot Smith Nikolaus Pevsner in his book *Buildings of England, Cumberland & Westmorland* described the house as mainly baronial with some Jacobean touches and the last thing one would expect is the real pele tower hiding behind a seemingly Victorian tower with its comical Knight in a niche. The couple bought the hall in 2014 undertaking a multi-million-pound restoration of the same. Gerald was a partner in an investment firm in London while Margot is a professional musician. Whilst this is their home, the business also includes luxury self-catering cottages and apartments within the Grade II* mansion. Here our group was split into two for a tour of the house hosted by the resident manager. Whilst one group toured the house the other took it in turns to partake in an excellent lunch of soup, sandwiches, tea and coffee. At the base of the stairs on the ground floor in a glass case is an exquisite iced cake model of the same.



From here we moved on to the 6th visit of the day which was to **GILNOCKIE TOWER** which is a simple rubble-built tower house of four storeys plus an attic measuring around 10 x 7.6 metres at the base. The basement comprises a vaulted cellar with gun loops to the southwest and north, a spiral stair in a southwest corner leads up to the first floor devoted to a hall. Above this there are two further rooms with the attic space above between the crow stepped gables. At the top of the wall corbels show the presence of a parapet walk. During the repair programme carried out between 2015 and 2018 the wall walk was sympathetically brought up to date to meet safety standards. The oldest part of the tower is thought to be the large stone by the doorway into the basement. The tower was built around 1520 by Johnny Armstrong a famous border outlaw; was burned in 1528 by Sir Christopher Dacre, English Warden of the Western Marches, and in 1530 Johnny and 50 followers were hanged by James V after being tricked into joining a hunting party. The tower was rebuilt but was damaged again by English raids in the 1540s. In 1978 the tower was a roofless ruin and was bought by Major TCR Armstrong-Wilson who undertook a full restoration including re-roofing and reconstruction of the floors at all levels. Now the tower is a Category A listed building. In 1995 it was purchased by the present owner Colin Armstrong, a former British consular based in South America.



From here we moved on to our next destination **KIRKANDREWS TOWER**. Built in the first half of the 16th century this is a tower house of three storeys with corbelled parapets, replacing an earlier tower and altered in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. The property is of sandstone rubble with a slate roof. The first floor doorway is reached via an external stone stair of the 19th century. Originally our visit here was to be one of external viewing but on the day we were allowed by



the private owner, John Lord, to view the interior with access to the parapet. There are remains of a barmkin to be seen. Also of interest here are the screen walls dated 1827 with the initials WG (Graham) over the entrance. The inner walls are partly of brick and red sandstone rubble facings with red sandstone ashlar entrance arches and dressings standing some three metres high with higher entrances projecting from the west and north wall of the tower. The flanking walls have battlemented parapet and blocked triple mullioned windows.



The culmination of our weekend tour was a visit to **BRACKENHILL TOWER**. The tower which is of national significance, both architecturally and historically, such that the buildings had remained largely unaltered for 300 years following the erection of the defensive tower at the height of the reiving activity in 1584 to the building of the hunting lodge in the 1800s. The property was in a perilous state before once again, Andy and Jan Ritchie acquired the same and undertook a massive and award-winning restoration

following its appearance on the 2003 BBC television series Restoration. Several years were expended in converting the ruinous site into the now fully restored self-catering holiday accommodation completed around 2010. Originally built by the infamous border reiver, Richie Graham, is now a unique Grade II* listed tower being the only surviving Scottish style clan tower house standing on English soil. Thanks, once again to Andy and Jan, cancelling holiday bookings for the weekend, we were able to enjoy the freedom to inspect this magnificent property. And once again, refreshments of tea, coffee and biscuits were provided by our hosts.

Whilst at the tower, the SCA plaque was presented to them in respect of Lochhouse Tower and here on the photograph we can see them with to the right of Dorothy, their son and fiancée. This was a fitting end to a memorable and highly enjoyable and educational weekend. The meticulous planning of which is a real credit to Andy and Jan, the organisers. From here, we all individually took our leave with fond memories and in eager anticipation of more SCA events to come throughout the summer, autumn and winter.



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Ken Batty, May 2026