

Border Reivers

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From the thirteenth to the early seventeenth century the border between the kingdoms of England and Scotland was a turbulent frontier, lacking in law and order. Ravaged in places to wasteland by frequent wars and invasions, the inhabitants had to adapt their way of life to survive. The constant threat of conflict offered little incentive for arable farming as crops would often be burned before they could be harvested. The livelihood of many Borderers therefore became the raiding or 'reiving' of livestock from their neighbours, both across the border and within their own country. As may be expected, this kind of activity attracted other associated crimes such as arson and pillaging as well as feuding and murder.

The Reiver came from all social classes and were skilled horsemen and guerrilla soldiers, familiar with arson, kidnapping and extortion. In this area reiving became a way of life. In the process of earning a living Reivers were just as likely to raid people on their own side of the border as across it. Raids could range in scale from large military-style operations involving gangs of men over several days, to more modest affairs conducted within a day. The Reiver rode a small pony known as a hobbler, which was noted for its sturdiness and ability to cover great distances over difficult ground at high speed. They carried a variety of weapons including the 'lang spear' or Border lance.



Carter Bar, Cheviot Hills © Wendy Tait Mayfield. Reproduced by kind permission.

Without the protection of either the Scots or English crown, the Reiver's allegiance was first and foremost to their family or 'surname'. This was a time when people owed clan loyalty to their blood relatives and it was common for these families to straddle the Border. Victims could be anyone outside the immediate family while raiders would even join forces to raid either side of the Border.

Prominent Reivers' Surnames

<i>Archibold</i>	<i>Armstrong</i>	<i>Beattie</i>	<i>Bell</i>	<i>Burns</i>
<i>Carleton</i>	<i>Carlisle</i>	<i>Carnaby</i>	<i>Carrs</i>	<i>Carruthers</i>
<i>Charlton</i>	<i>Collingwood</i>	<i>Crisp</i>	<i>Crozier</i>	<i>Cuthbert</i>
<i>Dacre</i>	<i>Davison</i>	<i>Dixon</i>	<i>Dodd</i>	<i>Douglas</i>
<i>Dunne</i>	<i>Elliot</i>	<i>Fenwick</i>	<i>Forster</i>	<i>Graham</i>
<i>Gray</i>	<i>Hall</i>	<i>Hedley</i>	<i>Henderson</i>	<i>Heron</i>
<i>Hetherington</i>	<i>Hume</i>	<i>Irvine/Irving</i>	<i>Johnstone</i>	<i>Kerr</i>
<i>Laidlaw</i>	<i>Little</i>	<i>Lowther</i>	<i>Maxwell</i>	<i>Milburn</i>
<i>Musgrove</i>	<i>Nixon</i>	<i>Noble</i>	<i>Ogle</i>	<i>Oliver</i>
<i>Potts</i>	<i>Pringle</i>	<i>Radcliffe</i>	<i>Reade</i>	<i>Ridley</i>
<i>Robson</i>	<i>Routledge</i>	<i>Rutherford</i>	<i>Salkeld</i>	<i>Scott</i>
<i>Selby</i>	<i>Shaftoe</i>	<i>Storey</i>	<i>Simpson</i>	<i>Tait</i>
<i>Taylor</i>	<i>Trotter</i>	<i>Turnbull</i>	<i>Wake</i>	<i>Watson</i>
<i>Wilson</i>	<i>Woodrington</i>	<i>Young</i>		

The central governments of both England and Scotland attempted to establish law and order across the Border, however a borderer would owe allegiance to England or Scotland only when it suited them or their family. When England and Scotland were at war, Reivers provided large numbers of cavalry such as at the battles of Otterburn (1388), Flodden Field (1513) and Solway Moss (1542).

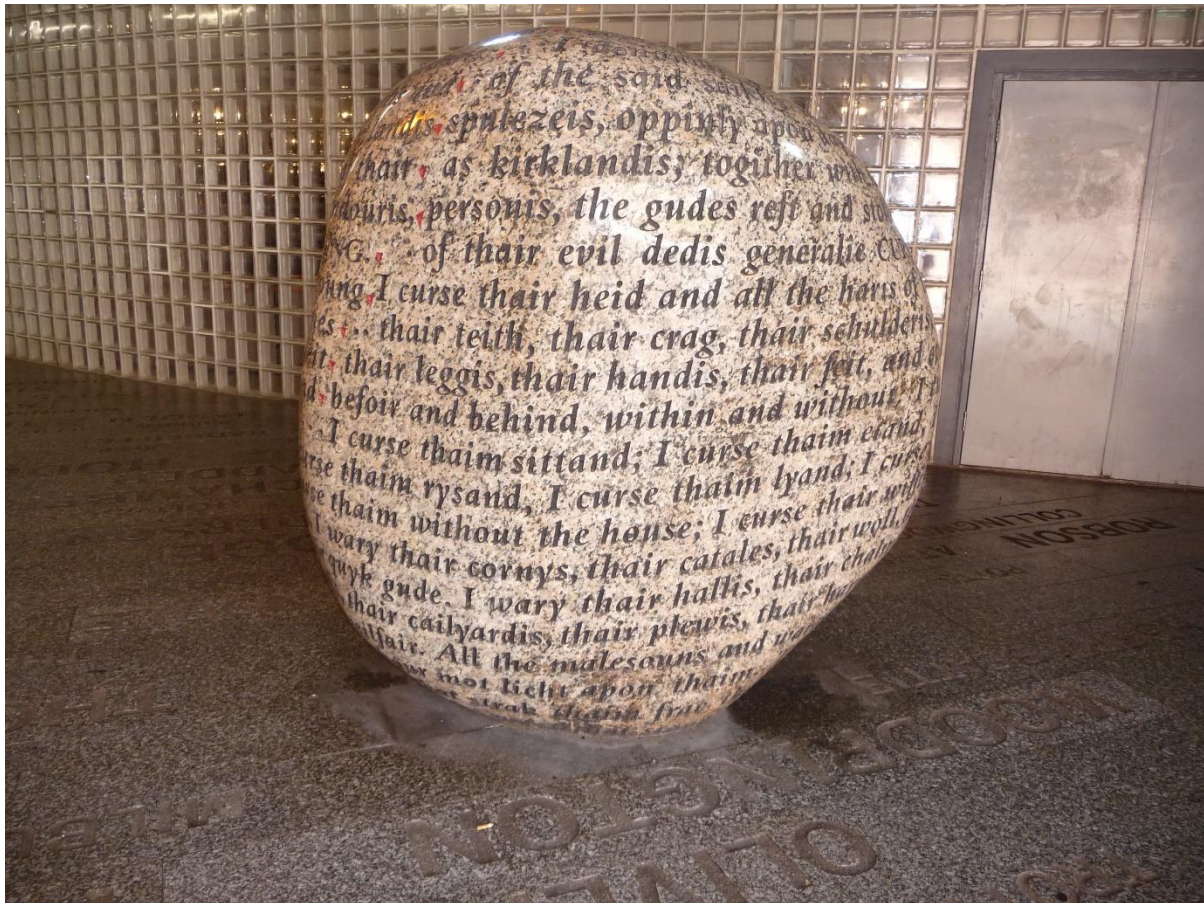
In an attempt to establish peace, codes of Border Laws were established and Wardens were appointed to settle disputes in the six Marches, or territories, three each side of the border. However, Wardens were themselves amongst the most notorious of Reivers.



Cessford Castle © Wendy Tait Mayfield. Reproduced by kind permission.

Following the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, several Scottish families launched raids into Cumbria. It was only following the Union of Crowns between England and Scotland in 1603 that a concerted effort was made by James VI and I to rid the Border of Reivers. James decreed that the Borders should be renamed 'the Middle Shires' and in 1605 he established a commission to bring law and order to the region. In the following years scores were hanged by the commission. Other Reivers were encouraged to leave and serve as mercenaries on the continent. The Armstrongs and the Grahams were singled out and banished to Fermanagh in Ireland. Some continued as outlaws and became known as 'Mosstroopers'. By the early 1620s peace had arrived in the Borders, possibly for the first time.

The Border Reivers have a contested legacy and memory. However, there are echoes of this way of life even today in the fortified dwellings called pele towers, their ballads and in our language, for example to be 'bereaved' meant to have suffered a visit from the Reivers, while 'blackmail' was originally protection money, paid to the reivers to avoid a visit.



The Cursing Stone, Carlisle © Wendy Tait Mayfield. Reproduced by kind permission.

Four hundred years later, the Borders are now peaceful, but such a history should not be forgotten. The Reivers were a hardy, independent, resourceful and resilient people - characteristics still evident in the modern-day Borderer.

The annual Hawick Reivers Festival commemorates this rich story, culture, and tradition. While not seeking to glamorise what was undoubtedly a bloody and violent period in our history they aim to give visitors a taste of what life was like for ordinary folks in sixteenth century Hawick. The festival has been held annually since 2003. It comprises a weekend of activities including re-enactments, concerts, lectures, drama, sixteenth century market, an encampment and a torchlight procession and fireworks display. With attractions to suit all ages, the events give the audience a unique opportunity to gain an understanding of life in this difficult and challenging period of our history. The 2023 Festival will take place on 24-26 March.

References and Resources:

With thanks to Wendy Tait Mayfield for providing some information and images for this post.

[Hawick Reivers Festival](#)

[Hawick Reivers | Facebook](#)

[Borders Family History Society \(bordersfhs.org.uk\)](http://bordersfhs.org.uk)

Alistair Moffat, *The Reivers: The Story of the Border Reivers* (2008)

Jackson Armstrong, *England's Northern Frontier: Conflict and Local Society in the Fifteenth-Century Scottish Marches* (2020)

George MacDonald Fraser, *The Steel Bonnets: The story of the Anglo-Scottish Border Reivers* (1971)