



# Fit for a king

Famous for being headstrong Harry Hotspur's home, pretty Warkworth sits on a rocky spur in a tight loop of the River Coquet

WORDS AND PICTURES BY STEVE NEWMAN



**Left:** Warkworth is thought to have been first erected around 1150 as a motte and bailey castle by Henry, Earl of Northumberland  
**Below:** Warkworth pictured around 1900 with the village pant and the market cross complete with gas lamp clearly visible



**Below:** The Ember, a narrow path that runs behind the houses of the main street, from the south and climbs up to beneath the castle mound



Every time I visit Warkworth I'm struck by the fact that it doesn't really seem to have made up its mind whether it's a village with a castle or castle with a village. But trapped within a meander of the River Coquet it still has a very medieval feel to it that has been lost in so many other North East villages.

It is a place you will want to visit, explore, savour and return to. Warkworth is one of the jewels in the Northumberland crown, a pretty village unspoilt by both modern development and tourism.

In Saxon times the village was known as Wercewode. Werce was an Abess who gave the Venerable Bede a sheet of linen to be used as his shroud and the word 'worth' means a fortified or palisaded place.

The best way to experience a trip back to the Middle Ages is to walk along the Ember, a narrow path that runs behind the houses of the main street from the south and climbs up to beneath the precipitous castle mound.

To do so takes you back nearly a thousand years as the long



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**Above:** Spanning the River Coquet at the north of the village is the 14th century narrow stone bridge with its boldly ribbed arches



The long gardens that stretch down to the river are known as the Burgages. A remnant of medieval strip farming that still survives to this day

narrow gardens of these houses, or burgages as they were known, slope gently down towards the river on your left.

Burgages are long, narrow strips of land running at right angles to the main streets in medieval towns. With narrow fronts and long thin courtyards they had connecting alleyways at the back. The houses or shops would usually be at the front facing onto the street whilst their workshops and yards would be behind.

The traces of burgage plots can often still be seen in towns that were laid out in medieval times and Warkworth's are a particularly fine example.

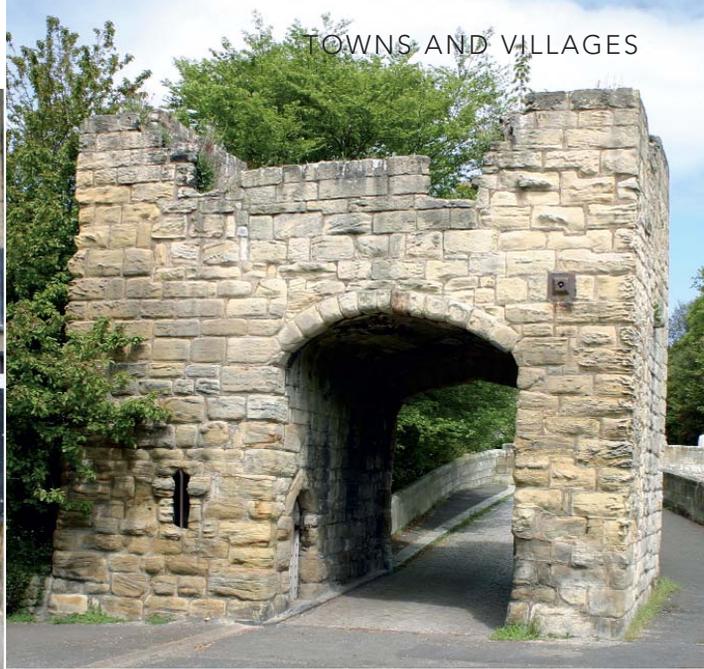
Celebrated architectural critic Nicholas Pevsner argued: 'Warkworth must be approached from the north. With its bridge, its bridge-tower, then Bridge Street at an angle joining the main street up a hill to the towering, sharply cut block of the keep, it is one of the most exciting sequences of views one can have in England.' Village life here revolves around the War Memorial Institute, a building bequeathed to the village in 1920 that contains several rooms, a hall and a stage.

Serena Coulter, chairman of the institute, says: 'There is a tremendous community spirit in Warkworth and it is such a lovely place to live. We have the drama group, choir, artists, leek club, youth club, British Legion and many other clubs all meeting here.'

The tree-lined streets of the village give it an air of tranquillity even when tourists are in town.

Resident Peter Atkinson says: 'It's a very friendly place. It's a short walk to the newsagent's but it can take me 25 minutes some mornings!'

The village's darkest day occurred in July 1174 when a Scottish army set fire to the village and put to death three hundred people who had been sheltering inside the church.



**Above:** The 13th century gate that guards the bridge is one of only two remaining in the country

*‘Warkworth offers one of the most exciting sequences of views one can have in England’*

Pleasant walks in the gorge of the river are popular with locals and visitors alike and one of these leads upstream to the ferry where you can cross the river at certain days and visit the Hermitage carved out of the rock.

The first known hermit was Thomas Barker who was appointed for life by the Earl of Northumberland in 1487. It wasn't such a bad life, however, as the incumbent had gardens, an orchard and pasture for his cattle.

After the Reformation the hermitage was abandoned and it became more of a curiosity until, as with the castle, it passed into the care of English Heritage. Many people have crossed over the river to visit the hermitage including Methodist leader John Wesley who preached in Warkworth in 1761.

At the opposite end of the village to the castle spanning the River Coquet is the 14th century narrow stone bridge with its boldly ribbed arches. At its southern end is the even earlier gate that guards the bridge and entrance to the village – one of only two remaining in the country (the other is at Monmouth).

Not surprisingly, Warkworth is a popular place on the tourist trail and there is little doubt the carpet of spring daffodils on the castle mound is one of the finest sights in Northumberland.

Art galleries – one of which, Village Art, is run by and shows works produced by local artists – restaurants and book shops have also made the village one of the most sought-after places to live in the county.

A modern two-bedroom bungalow will cost you £144,000, meanwhile for a three-bedroom family home located on the periphery of the village you would expect to pay around £250,000. To buy one of the older, more established properties in the village you will pay at least £500,000. 🏡

🏰 Warkworth Castle is thought to have been erected around 1150 as a motte and bailey castle by Henry, Earl of Northumberland, the son of David I of Scotland. The castle was home to Harry Hotspur and saw much intrigue in the reign of Henry IV, so much so that scenes from Shakespeare's history play of that title are set in Warkworth.

🏰 Hotspur was immortalised as a charismatic warrior and the hero of the piece – as well as a young contemporary of the 15 year-old Prince Harry. Shakespeare used artistic licence here, as Hotspur was in fact 37 years old at the Battle of Shrewsbury and already something of a celebrity.

🏰 In other respects, however, Shakespeare captured Hotspur pretty well: he lived in the saddle, had no head for politics, was headstrong and quick to settle a perceived insult with his sword.

🏰 Today run by English Heritage, the castle's glory is the magnificent cross-shaped keep with its extremely rare plan, including a light well in the centre of the building. One can only imagine what it must have been like in its heyday with battlements, chimneys and towers sprouting from its roof. Much of the fabric of the historic building now lies in the houses of the village making an appropriate permanent link between them.

🏰 Nowadays the castle and village come together for Warkworth's annual flower show.

🏰 'Many of the businesses in the village are geared to the visitors we get here,' says Sue Riches, who works for English Heritage. 'Warkworth is such a pretty place and we do encourage our visitors to go into the village and use the businesses there.'

🏰 With so much history and violence it's not surprising that Warkworth has its fair share of ghosts. The ghost of Harry Hotspur's mother has been seen wandering from the Grey Mare's Tail Tower to the Collegiate Church, whilst Hotspur himself is said to appear in the keep. There are also rumoured to be a couple of ghosts at the Warkworth House Hotel. Apparently a soldier who killed a butcher's boy has roamed the top floor from the time of World War Two when the house was commandeered by the army as barracks and an officers mess, and a ghostly lady has also been seen sitting at the bar.