

# When the boat comes in

The tiny Northumberland village of Craster is world famous for its kippers. Steve Newman takes a look around

**J**ohn Murdoch must have one of the most delightful walks to work of anyone in the country. Each morning he takes the picturesque one and a quarter mile grassy path that leads from Craster to Dunstanburgh Castle to open up and receive the visitors that come here throughout the year.

'Yes, it is a nice walk but it can be quite forbidding when the weather's bad,' says John.

Now in the care of The National Trust but managed by English Heritage the castle may not be as geographically close to the village as at Bamburgh and Warkworth but is just as imposing and just as vital to the local economy.

'The castle attracts over 40,000 visitors a year, and these of course



Perched above the harbour the houses at Craster

all add to the economy of the village,' he says.

The village of Craster owes its name to the Roman fort of Craucetr that stood above the present site. The village in turn gave its name to the Craster family, one of the oldest in Northumberland.

The first mention of the family is reference to William de Craucetr holding the estate in 1272. Craster Tower, listed in a survey of forts carried out in 1415, is a strong rectangular stone tower, of two storeys with a vaulted basement. Now there is a fine Georgian house added on.

Until the late 18th century, Craster village was situated at the top of the hill, immediately north and east of the Tower.

It was the Craster family who built the present harbour in 1906



in memory of Captain John Craster who was killed during active service in Tibet, in 1904. A memorial plaque hangs on the harbour wall.

As well as fishing, Craster also developed a prosperous quarrying business. The stone was taken down from the quarry by an overhead rail system of wires and buckets, which were tipped into tall bins on top of the South Pier.

These bins were taken down at the beginning of the Second World War – villagers were told – because they could have been tell-tale landmarks for enemy aircraft.

It now appears that they were removed because the moving metal scoops would have looked like low-flying aircraft on the screen of the secret radar station just to the north. 📖



Kipperies wait to be transported to luxury hotels and supermarkets



**John Murdoch** says  
'It's a privilege to be responsible for managing a place so spectacularly isolated and atmospheric as this'



**Neil Robson** says  
'Craster is a very safe place with everybody looking out for each other'



**Mick Oxley** says  
'Craster is such a beautiful place to live'



Kippers being smoked hanging above the fires made from whitewood shavings and oak sawdust

The archway-shaped base of the bins remains to this day on the south pier puzzling many a visitor as to what it actually is!

Today Craster is best known for its kippers. L Robson and Sons Ltd have supplied the Royal Family in the past and now supply Waitrose and several train companies.

The kippers and salmon are still prepared by the traditional method of smoking hung in racks above fires using whitewood shavings mixed with oak sawdust.

Neil Robson, who is the fourth generation of the family to have run the business, says: 'The village has changed a lot in my time. Many houses are now being used as holiday homes these days. But Craster is a very safe place to live with everybody looking out for each other.'

Fishing does still take place here and Eddie Grey maintains a link with the past by using a traditional Northumbrian coble – one of the last to have been built at Seahouses in 1980 – for his crab and lobster pots.

Although living in Craster it is necessary for Eddie to berth his coble at Beadnell because it is a much safer harbour.

'I was born and bred in Craster and I have noticed a big change since I was a lad with a lot of newcomers moving into the village,' he says.

'Fishing has changed to and it is a crying shame that all the traditions and history of the coble may well be gone in a short time



Mick Oxley's gallery features his dramatic seascapes and sweeping panoramas of the local coastline

the way things are going.'

Craster's link with the sea is apparent when you drive in past the new stone marker showing a lobster pot with a crab and lobster. It was placed here recently by the village Development Trust, who have also done sterling work with the car parks and information panels for visitors.

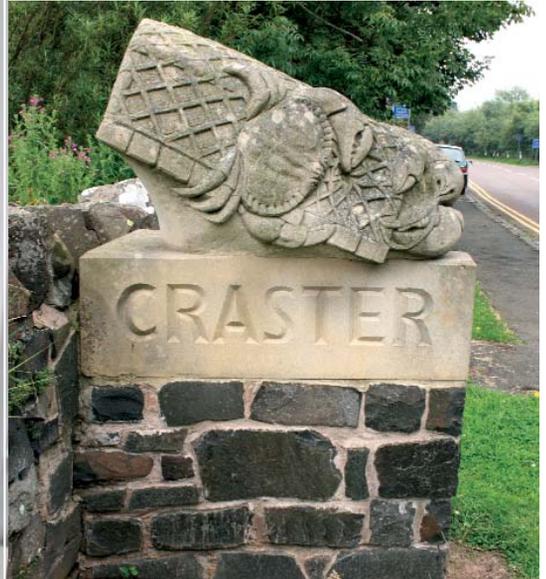
When locals began to worry about losing their history, a group set up Craster Online as an internet depository for people's memories of the village. Now their attention is turning towards restoring the village hall.

It is impossible not for the eye to be drawn northwards towards the brooding mass of Dunstanburgh from the harbour. Turner painted the castle many times often rising before dawn to walk along the shore.

Indeed his 'The Lilburn Tower at Sunrise' painted in 1797 is one of the most beloved of his pictures. He also became fascinated by the waves crashing over the rocks below.

Much of Craster's housing around the harbour has now been bought as holiday and weekend homes. If you're intending to buy a house here a three bedroom semi in the newer part of the village away from the harbour will cost you in the region of £199,000. However a similar size property with sea views nearer the beach will go for around £250,000. 🏡

**SPARE LINE NEEDED HERE**



The new stone marker showing a lobster pot with a crab and lobster was placed here recently by the village Development Trust

#### Dunstanburgh Castle

🏰 The castle occupies a prominent headland about one mile north of Craster. On the south side there is a gentle slope towards the castle whilst the northerly approach is much steeper with the northern perimeter jutting into Embleton Bay forming a 150-foot cliff.

🏰 The first building works at Dunstanburgh took place under Thomas, Earl of Lancaster in 1312 and for its time the castle has a very high standard of building, comfort and design. It was deliberately intended to impress visitors with Sir Thomas's power and wealth.

🏰 Well-lit residential chambers furnished with fireplaces in the Lilburn and Constable towers as well as in the magnificent double-towered gatehouse show a surprising degree of comfort and style.

🏰 When, at the end of the 14th century, Dunstanburgh Castle passed into the hands of John of Gaunt, he carried out substantial alterations and closed up the entrance to the gatehouse making it into a more traditional keep.

🏰 Because it was never converted for accommodation as at Warkworth and Bamburgh it is possible to study the military architecture of the building in great detail.

🏰 The large, apparently unused land in the middle of the castle may have served as a billeting area for troops. English Heritage have discovered a small port below which could have transported arms and equipment.

🏰 John Murdoch says: 'On certain days photographs of the castle offer different perspectives as it can be wonderfully lit at dawn or dusk throughout the year, especially in winter with clear blue skies.'

🏰 'It's a privilege to be responsible for managing a place so spectacularly isolated and atmospheric as this.'

🏰 The Castle is open throughout the year but times vary. Tel. 01665 576231