

## *Evistones*

The reivers are unique and they're ours. For three long and bitter centuries they survived in their hostile upland dales, forming cross-border criminal mafias and changing national allegiances probably more often than they changed their socks. They made *Game of Thrones* seem more like *Watch with mother*. None of it was nice.

If you want that 'real' borderer experience and you've not got time to get to Hermitage, try Evistones. On the main road to Carter Bar, past Otterburn and around eight miles (13 kilometres) north of Bellingham, you pass a sign branching left marked 'Redesdale E.H. Farm'. This stands for Experimental Husbandry and was established by the then Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries ("MAFF"), sometime after the end of the War. Its mission statement is to improve efficiencies amongst the hill farming community. One of their far-sighted innovations was to fit ageing teeth with stainless steel dentures to overcome tooth decay, sounds like a creature *Dr. Who* might encounter in some parallel galaxy!

Drive onto the track and pull up onto the verge and then walk downhill toward the river and Stobbs farm on the north bank. John Dodds in his magisterial study identified this as a likely bastle in its original incarnation but there's more across the old Bailey bridge that spans the Rede. Keep on the lane which runs along the south bank heading north-west past a set of barns it turns back on itself climbing a reasonably steep incline. Half way up look to your right and you'll see the place set some eighty yards or so above the track.

Then you'll be in Evistones and there's nowhere like it. If it was warmer and less windswept, drier and brighter, this could be Fort Bravo or some forgotten

firebase in the Mekong Delta. But it's a reiver township, a cluster of stone bastles, one of which has the vault still standing. John Dodds counts three bastles but I'm prepared to hazard an assertion there's nearer a dozen; squat stone blockhouses devoid of any ornament, the whole compound surrounded by a curtain wall or palisade, the footings for which can be traced around [n]. It's bare, basic and bleak. Wuthering Heights would look like the Cotswolds by comparison. It's built for all round defence, every building planned for war, not too many parterres or peacocks.

I can't imagine there was ever anything likeable or quaint and the inhabitants seem to have been Hedleys and Fletchers. A bad lot according to such scant records as exist and it seems to have been abandoned at some point in the seventeenth century. If we want to understand the reivers, this place is a light-bulb moment, a border epiphany. The quickest glance will tell you the arts of peace never flourished in this place and those who lived here had much to fear and lived their lives in anticipation of attack, probably by way of retribution. Julius Caesar tells us Cassius had a 'lean and hungry look' - well he'd have fitted in just fine.

What we lack is a Samuel Pepys, or Mrs. Pepys of the border. We hear about the reivers rather than from them. How the goodwife felt about her husband's nocturnal enterprise is generally unrecorded. Domestic life, of course did go on, people married often in defiance of the cross border prohibition, raised children and focused on the daily business of survival.

In the midst of the mayhem are the women: sitting quietly at home ... Well, not really. The women of Redesdale are as notorious as their men, riding out in their own right when necessary. Those remaining in the bastle can act in defence of home and property, using gun, bow or knife to fend off intruders. Or sending

out the raiders themselves; a famous painting of the C19th shows a goodwife presenting a pair of spurs on an empty platter – *fetch the supper in*.

## ***Evistones – assignment page***

### **Background**

Consider the history of the border reivers and three hundred years of border warfare, think of the causes, events and effects than attempt to answer the following questions, a maximum of 100 words per question (all answers are in your own words these are personal responses, what does this heritage mean for *you*:

#### Question one:

What does the term ‘border reivers’ or ‘steel bonnets’ mean to you; who were they where did they come from, what factors shaped their existence and duration?

#### Question two:

Think about the ‘riding’ names, which surnames today are synonymous with a reiver heritage, why and where on the border do they originate:

#### Question three:

Where and in what type of structures do the (a) Scottish and (b) English reivers live, describe the different types of defensible habitation and quote surviving examples.

#### Question four:

Who were the March wardens, how were the marches governed, what were the *Leges Marchiarum* – what went wrong at the Reidswire Truce in July 1575?

Question five:

Who, or which officer resided at Hermitage Castle in Liddesdale and why did Mary Queen of Scots go there at such risk in 1566, what modern breakfast table accessory resulted from her illness?

Question six:

Who was Kinmont Will Armstrong and what happened in Carlisle with him in 1596, consider carefully all the parties involved, 'Bold' Buccleuch, the Grahams, Lord Scrope and Queen Elizabeth I?

Question seven:

How did the border marches morph into the 'Middle Shires' and why? Describe the nature of the process and its results.

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