

UNPLUGGING IN THE WILDS OF *Northumberland*

British Travel Journal visits The Lord Crewe Arms. Located in a picturesque spot, featuring beautiful moorlands and vast dark skies, it's the ideal place to disconnect and learn more about this storied region

Text by Amy Bonifas



Nestled in the neat estate village of Blanchland, The Lord Crewe Arms is the ideal retreat if you're craving true peace and quiet and want to explore the history and nature of this underrated area.

Built in the 12th century, 'The Crewe' – as locals have affectionately named it – was once the abbot's lodge and guesthouse for the monks of neighbouring Blanchland Abbey. The hotel's gardens were the monks' cloisters, and the ground-floor dining room was a great medieval feasting hall. That was until Henry VIII's bold move to dissolve and close most of the monasteries across the country.

The Bishop of Durham, Lord Crewe acquired the building in the 1700s before leaving his estates to the 'Lord Crewe



It's not often you find a professional-grade telescope in your hotel room. But Northumberland is one of the least-populated regions of the UK – and also very low on light pollution – making it hands-down one of the best spots to stargaze the night away this autumn.

The heather-strewn moors and fells of the North Pennines stretch beneath some of the darkest skies in the country, and lush pine forests thrive in the cleanest air. And if that isn't reason enough to visit, it's also home to one of the most unique and oldest hotels.



Trustees', and it became a place for local lead miners to enjoy a pint or two after a shift.

Now, the flagstone floors and wrought-iron light fittings still create a monastic atmosphere, but our welcome is anything but. The bedrooms are cosy and stocked with homemade butter fudge, the jolly staff are poised with local recommendations, and there's a roaring fire in just about every room.

One of the key things that drew us here was the number of wild and wonderful experiences the hotel can arrange for you – from historic guided tours of nearby Hadrian's Wall to stargazing evenings in the hotel's garden.

We opt for a local nature walk with ecologist and biology teacher Pippa Scott-Harden, who greets us glowingly in reception and whizzes us in her 4x4 across the moors – "There's usually a roosting barn owl in one of our outbuildings. Let's go check in."

The beauty of Blanchlands is undeniable. We venture deeper into the woodland and walk along the rushing River Derwent, where Pippa helps translate the array of morning birdsong. Her passion is infectious, and we stop to admire the rare and delicate wildflowers and the ancient native Scots pine trees – the only place in England you'll find these towering red-tinged beauties.

You can spot everything from roe deer to red squirrels here, but strangely, we're most fascinated by the silvery, seaweed-like fronds clinging to some of the tree trunks. "I'm so glad you asked," beams Pippa. "There are so many species of lichen here, and it's only able to grow in places with low pollution."

She offers us a spyglass to take a closer look at a patch of bright-red lichen nicknamed 'British Soldiers' growing in a tiny gap within the dry stone wall. It feels like a long time since I've stopped to look this closely at nature and appreciate its minuscule beauty.



We treat ourselves to a tea and fudge pitstop at the hotel. Our room is Penny Pie, in one of the newly revamped miners' cottages. Decorated in rich, earthy tones with hints of tweed, the stone fireplace and a sumptuous roll-top bath will keep you toasty on chillier evenings. I love that the books are carefully curated, and we find everything from old-school ordinance maps to astrology guides.

On our way to dinner, we stop to watch wagtails and sparrows hop around the garden as the light starts to fade.



Already, I can see the stars peeking through. But first, we head to The Crypt. Unlike your average local, this pub is



tucked away in a medieval vaulted chamber. The walls are lined with coat-of-arms shields and chalkboards offering chef's snacks. Guests chatter away by candlelight, sipping on autumnal cocktails – the hotel even has its own 'Crewe Brewe,' a tasty golden bitter.

You can eat in either The Hilyard Room, a flagstoned medieval hall adorned with old family oil portraits, or the refined Bishop's Dining Room upstairs. We dress up a little for our first night and head up the stone staircase. North East native Chef Paul Johnson has worked alongside Michelin-starred chefs and once owned a pub in Northumberland, and the menu reflects this mix of high-end taste and humble, local ingredients.

We try the North Sea torched mackerel with bitter watercress and zingy pickled fennel, and the Northumberland cheese soufflé – bubbling and golden. The venison haunch blushes pink on my plate, drizzled with red wine gravy and topped with blue cheese and hazelnuts. The wine list has some bold and unusual names, and we opt for a punchy Georgian red to pair with our rich choices. Afterwards, we peek into the cosy lounge next door and spot the original privy chamber hidden in the corner.

One of the hotel staff reminds us to look up during the walk back, and we're treated to countless stars and constellations shimmering against the blackest sky. We crane our necks to take it in – "So this is what the night sky actually looks like," whispers my husband.

For breakfast, it has to be the full Northumberland cooked breakfast with proper black pudding and a separate

'We try the North Sea torched mackerel with bitter watercress and zingy pickled fennel, and the Northumberland cheese soufflé – bubbling and golden.'

bowl of beans (just how I like it). You can even order hot, buttered crumpets as a side – genius. It's the perfect fuel for our 10km walk along Hadrian's Wall, just a short drive away. We start at the Housesteads Roman Fort – the most complete of its kind in Britain – and follow in Roman footsteps to Sycamore Gap. We take a moment to imagine the great tree that once stood here.

The satisfying ache in our legs is made all the sweeter knowing we can return to the hotel for dinner in the great



hall. Our table is snuggled right next to the hearth, and we thaw out while tucking into pan-fried skate wing with lashings of brown butter and capers and a side of truffle Parmesan fries. We get chatting to fellow guests as their dogs nap happily on the stone floor.

Before long, it's time to check out, and it's genuinely hard to say goodbye to this place. During our final walk, we visit Blanchland Abbey and head into the local craft shop to buy one of Pippa's red squirrel lino prints (yes, she also happens to be a popular local artist). It's possible to pack so much into a weekend here, and we return feeling recharged and freshly topped up with handy pub-quiz-friendly trivia. What more could you ask for? ♦

→ Rooms at the Lord Crewe Arms start from £164 per night on a B&B basis. Nature walks with Pippa Scott-Harden, stargazing evenings with a local expert and historic Hadrian's Wall walks are available to book directly through the hotel; lordcrewearmsblanchland.co.uk

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